Co-operation at work: an ethnographic study of worker-managed organizations

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CO-OPERATION AT WORK:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WORKER-MANAGED ORGANIZATIONS

submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study of four worker-managed organizations provides the data for understanding the nature of co-operation at work. The workgroups in this study are shown as having some similarities in the problems they confront and the formal structural arrangements they adopt, but are more clearly differentiated at the level of organizational culture. The thesis concludes that each of the workgroups manifests a 'co-operative spirit' in very different ways.

Each workgroup is observed to move through developmental stages that are marked by shifts in culture. This report highlights and describes these developmental stages as a way of illustrating the way in which a co-operative ethos may emerge and become sustained over time. At the same time, the experience of these workgroups indicates the vulnerability of a co-operative ethos, and the report illuminates how co-operation may flounder and decline at the various developmental stages. The thesis establishes that each developmental stage requires different responses and adaptations in order for a co-operative ethos to be sustained.

The thesis seeks to explore and understand worker-managed organizations from the inside. In this way, the meanings that participants themselves give to co-operation provide the main parameters within which to understand the phenomenon. The thesis concludes that there is no one best way to predict organizational success for co-operative managements. Factors to do with individual behaviour, group processes, work routines and external forces do have an

effect on co-operativeness, although they are interdependent in ways that require unique and situation-specific responses. What is a sustaining and nourishing mix of factors for one organization is not necessarily transferable to another, even if it is at the same general phase of development. In addition, the meaning attached to co-operative working varies from group to group, and the thesis argues that these unique meanings must figure prominently in any consideration of goal achievement.

The research for this thesis was conducted with a view to reducing the separation between observer and observed sought after by positivist rules of scientific inquiry. The thesis seeks to document the research process with as much vigour and enthusiasm as the research results.

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INTRODUCTION

I.1 Introduction

This dissertation reports on a study of worker-managed organizations. It includes a discussion of the research perspectives and methodologies that I employed, ethnographies of four worker-managed organizations, a comprehensive review of the literature, and an analysis of my findings.

In this introduction, I will provide two sorts of background to the study. First I will highlight my personal motives for the research, outlining the questions and concerns that gave the inquiry its initial impetus. Second, I will introduce the topic of worker-managed organizations in a general way with reference to the characteristic definitional, typological and research debates. I will follow this discussion by outlining the questions and puzzles that my inquiry sets out to address. The section concludes with an overall plan of the thesis.

I.2 Personal Background

I began my formal inquiry in 1985 after a decade of working as a manager, consultant, trainer and university teacher. All of these work experiences had taken place in very large, traditional organizations, mainly in hospitals and universities. My decision to engage in a long-term research project reflected a need I felt for both personal and professional development. Professionally, I had decided to orient my career more clearly in the direction of university teaching, and I

realized that I needed the credential and experience of doctoral research to achieve this goal.

In combination with these fairly straightforward professional goals, I envisioned my doctoral research as an opportunity to look for some answers to several questions and puzzles that had been spinning around in my mind for a long time. In particular, I often found myself wondering if there might be alternatives to the orthodox and accepted ways of managing work activities. This question reflected not only my personal curiosity about alternative approaches to management, but my observations of how other people seemed to experience hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations. Let me explain this in more detail.

Over the years I had observed, heard about, and been part of several work situations where there seemed to be a lack of co-operation, and where conflict and job dissatisfaction were pervasive. My role as a consultant often placed me face-to-face with people and organizations where goodwill and co-operation were at a premium. In my role as a trainer and teacher, my adult students had never-ending stories about workplaces where things were not going well from their perspective. There were two common themes in many of these scenarios. Many people reported the sheer size of the organization contributed to their feelings of malaise and alienation. A second theme emerged in reports by workers that if they could just get on with managing themselves - transcending the hierarchy and authority patterns of their organization - work would be simpler, easier, more efficient, more satisfying, and ultimately more co-operative. I found myself wondering: 1) are there organizations 'out there' that are small and managed without a formal

hierarchy; 2) if they exist, are they infused with a co-operative ethos; and 3) assuming they exist, what lessons might they have for organizations in general?

Thus, my inquiry began even before my formal research programme, with a personal attraction to the idea of co-operative management, and to a type of organization outside of my own experience. My curiosity became more and more intense and I began some library reading, focusing in particular on organizations formally committed to non-hierarchical and co-operative relationships. These organizations, usually referred to as worker co-operatives in the literature, I discovered, were few in number, usually very small, and appeared to have very little written about them. The more I read, the more I became eager to visit a few, to see and experience what they were like.

In tandem with my interest in co-operation and alternative approaches to management, I was also increasingly drawn to new and emerging ideas about organizational research. As the years went by, I found myself less and less enchanted with the prevailing quantitative, quasi-experimental bias in organizational research, and more and more attracted to qualitative methodologies. During my earlier education and worklife, I had undertaken a number of research projects, and while some of these projects had used traditional approaches to organizational research by employing scientific designs and quantitative methodologies, the projects that I found most exciting, relevant and helpful were those that had me more significantly engaged with people by using techniques such as open-ended interviewing and participant-observation. I had become very attracted to the organizational culture perspective as

a way of understanding and explaining human behaviour, and I wanted to explore and apply these research ideas as fully as possible.

I.3 Background to the Topic: Worker-managed Organization?

There is a variety of descriptions and titles that people use when referring to enterprises that are managed by workers. In the literature, terms such as 'worker co-operative, 'co-operative working', 'worker self-management' and 'collective management' are all used to describe workplaces in which workers set out to manage themselves co-operatively (Thornley 1981; Oakeshott 1978). Some are large with several hundred workers and may have a formal hierarchy (such as the Plywood manufacturing industry on the West coast of the United States [see Gunn 1984]), but the majority are small, some with as few as three members, and are usually collectively-managed.

A common theme in any definition of a worker co-operative is the idea of a business with common ownership, open membership, democratic control, limited return on capital investment, equitable distribution of surplus, commitment to social and educational aims, and co-operation between co-operatives (Cornforth, et al 1988). Not all worker-managed organizations, however, fall within these criteria. For example, some may have boards, external stakeholders or other advisory bodies.

In order to distinguish between the various types of worker co-operatives, most commentators have devised elaborate typologies. Much debate focuses on those factors that set this type of workgroup apart, both from other organizations, and from each other. In addition to obvious differences such as size, product and service, organizations of

this kind are often placed into typologies based on origins and founding goals. Yonge and Rigge (1983) use origins as a typological tool, and find three general types: rescues and buy-outs by workers of ailing firms; conversions of successful firms; and new starts. Schuller (1985) adds another category: those that are 'forced' through government legislated industrial democracy schemes (such as co-determination in Germany (Jenkins 1973; Miles 1981), and the self-managed economy of Yugoslavia (Estrin and Barttlet 1982; Miles 1981). Still another type would be those that are organized as part of a community (such as the Israeli Kibbutz [Leviaton and Rosner 1980]), and the religious-based communities of Quakers and Mennonites. Cornforth, et al (1988) expand on the notion of typography by origin, and classify co-operative organizations by the dominant motivation behind formation: philanthropic (owners handing-over their business to workers); radical/idealistic; and job creation/saving.

In order to draw distinctions between all of the organizations that fall under the rubric of worker-managed, most typologies are also concerned with the amount of worker ownership and worker control over management processes. Rigid definitions at these levels exclude most of the larger workplaces and often eliminate some of the smaller ones as well. Some typographers exclude any group where workers do not completely own their business, and others require groups to demonstrate absolute and egalitarian control over the decision-making processes before they can be included.

Early in my project, I decided that my research would be open to a fairly broad interpretation of 'worker-managed organization'. While I

was clear that my interests lay with smaller workplaces without a formal hierarchy, beyond this I decided not to narrowly 'pre-define' the sort of workgroups that I would visit. Thus, from a typological perspective, the workgroups I will report on in this study can be seen as subsets of the larger category, 'worker co-operative'. My inquiry focused on small worker-managed organizations with a 'public' definition of themselves as non-hierarchically managed, where the primary source of economic livelihood for members was the organization itself, and workgroups that had been in existence for at least two years.

Once I became familiar with the literature on worker co-operatives, I learned that it was much more extensive than I had originally imagined, and that I was not alone in finding this type of organization intriguing. I discovered that co-ops were a type of workplace that attracted researchers with specialized interests in such things economics, management, politics and history. I also learned that the majority of researchers approached worker co-operatives with quite specific questions, wondering about such things as whether co-ops could redress the labour/capital equation, and if co-op workers experienced more job satisfaction and less alienation than their counterparts in traditional organizations.

Although I will be considering most of this literature in detail in Chapter 8, it is helpful to get a feel for it at this stage of my thesis, not only as a way of introducing my topic, but also as a way of locating my interests and goals within the broader research community. At this early stage, as a result, I will briefly consider some of the questions that have been raised, and the insights that have been

obtained, paying particular attention to the work of historians and social scientists. I will follow this overview with an outline of the questions, goals and perspective that initiated my own research project.

I.3.1 Historical development and demographic data

Some inquirers are concerned with gathering, preserving and analysing the history of democratic and co-operative working. In particular, the British, European and Israeli experiences are well researched, and a growing body of information is available about other countries, including the United States and Canada. Some commentators trace the origins of worker self-management as far back as ancient Greece (Warner 1984), but King and van de Vall (1978) are more typical in suggesting that it is has been a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning around two hundred years ago. King and van de Vall suggest that the genesis of the idea of worker self-management, as well as other manifestations of industrial democracy, has been politically motivated, and can be traced to the rise of socialism in Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States. In their sketch of the historical development of industrial democracy in Europe, they cite the influence of the utopian socialism of Robert Owen in Britain, the proletarian socialism of Marx and Michael Bakunin, the Fabian socialism of the Webbs and Shaw, and the guild socialism of G. D. H. Cole. Commenting on the European experience, King and van de Vall (1979:4) write on the similarities, differences and nuances of these influences:

> the common denominator is the plan to extend the principles and procedures of political democracy in some form into the industrial sphere. But they differ on such issues as the nature of workers participation, its impact on management, and

> ways to combine the principles of democracy with the efficiency demands of industrial production.

Differing solutions to these issues, they posit, have produced the many different forms of workplace democracy that we see to-day, including the small autonomous worker co-operative.

In a similar vein to European historians, Jones (1984:37) suggests that socialism and associated ideas were at the heart of experiments in North America, representing the manifestation of:

> a deep-rooted and persistent alternate tradition in American society ... a sharp departure from normal capitalist practice.

Also cited as important in American developments is the 20th century's human relations and human potential movements with their emphasis on workers' participation in management and autonomous working groups.

Researchers in both the United Kingdom and the United States have shown that there have been some periods in history when the interest in and growth of worker co-operatives have been significantly higher than at other times. As an example, Bate and Carter (1986) discovered distinct cycles of experimentation with worker co-operatives since the early 1800's in Britain. Jones (1984) traces a worker co-operative movement in the United States as far back as 1790 and estimates that there had been several hundred such experiments by 1959, with a subsequent surge in the 1960's and 70's. As with Bate and Carter, Jones presents a picture of American interest in worker co-operatives as cyclical - interest and experimentation occurring much more in some periods than others, the most recent period being the 1960's.

Insofar as the contemporary worker co-operative movement is

concerned, Cornforth, et al (1988) counts just over 1,200 in Britain at the end of 1986, employing approximately 8,500 people. Figures from the United States suggest that there were upwards of 800 worker co-operatives in 1980 (Jackall and Crain 1984).

I.3.2 Social science research

Social scientists from a wide range of perspectives have explored the functioning of worker co-operatives. For example, economists (see Vanek 1975) have focused on the efficiency and productivity of co-ops, comparing them to traditional small businesses, and political scientists are interested in the degree to which worker co-operatives can redress the 'conflictual' capital/labour relationship that is the underpinning of capitalist organization (see McMonnies 1985; Abell 1979, 1985). Some economists are optimistic about the potential for efficiency and effectiveness; others are more pessimistic. Political scientists, like economists, are both positive and negative about the ability of co-ops to alter prevailing worker/owner arrangements.

Organizational behaviourists, on the other hand, have approached self-managed workgroups with questions about commitment, worker satisfaction, leadership and motivation (see Case and Taylor 1979; Lindenfeld and Rothschild-Whitt 1982). As a rule, these researchers find that worker co-operatives are able to provide for more member satisfaction and higher worker motivation. These commentators often base their views on the human relations school of thought, which postulates that increased worker autonomy over decision-making should lead to higher commitment and job satisfaction.

I.4 My Research Objectives

Even an introductory review of the literature concerned with worker co-operatives is helpful in acquiring a picture of the debates and questions that have preoccupied most researchers. Because they are a type of organization that challenges many of the 'accepted' and 'approved' ways of organizing work activity, they provide a fertile ground for research into alternative methods and ideas, and it is not surprising that they have attracted a wide range of scholars.

My research, while following on the interests of others, and acknowledging the sorts of conclusions that have been drawn, sets out to be somewhat different - both in terms of goals and methods. My goal in this endeavour has been to explore worker-managed organizations from the inside, guided in the first instance by general, rather than specific questions. I approached the study with the confidence that the most important issues and puzzles would emerge from within the research encounter, rather than external to it. I began my inquiry with the goal of exploring organizational cultures, and it seemed to me that this required a holistic perspective. Insofar as it was possible, I wanted to reach an understanding of the meanings that participants employed to make sense of their experience.

Thus, my formal research programme began with two objectives: 1) to embark on a major research project using qualitative methodologies and an organizational culture perspective; and 2) to come to an understanding of the nature and texture of small, worker-managed organizations from the inside. This dissertation is the documentation of my journey, discoveries, findings and, I would hasten to add, my

imperfections. Part of the outcome of any research endeavour, I believe, is learning about the process of research itself, and then building on these lessons in subsequent investigations.

I.5 The Plan of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into four sections with a total of eleven chapters. The first section outlines the overall research framework or perspective that has informed and directed the entire inquiry. I have chosen this as my starting point because I believe that it is necessary, and indeed vital, to be as clear as possible about the assumptions, values, beliefs and theoretical stance that have guided my inquiry.

The first chapter in Section I identifies the two main paradigms in social science research: positivism and naturalism. After discussing the ontological, epistemological and human nature assumptions inherent in both paradigms, I align myself primarily with naturalism, drawing on both scholarly and personal material to support my position. I then outline the general methodological issues that naturalism raises for research into the social world. With naturalism, a research project is best characterized as an inquiry into the nature of the whole social system being considered. The overriding concern is with the way in which a group of people have constructed their world; with the shared meanings, symbols and values that shape their individual and group behaviour.

In keeping with the paradigm of naturalism, I characterize my inquiry as a process of exploration. In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the specific research methodology that I used in the study

by making reference to research design, data collection, data analysis, reporting and trustworthiness. I begin and conclude the chapter by emphasizing that the inquiry was one of ongoing discovery and emergent design, indicating that issues and dilemmas to do with methodology surfaced throughout the inquiry. Chapter 2 also highlights the results of my first visit to a worker-managed organization - a group of architects in Bristol. Although this visit was brief and did not provide the basis for a case study, it was a formative early experience.

Section II of the dissertation provides ethnographies of four worker-managed organizations, and is accordingly divided into four chapters (3-6). These cases studies provide cultural portraits of each workgroup, making reference to the setting, history, people, work routines and procedures, and negotiation processes. The four organizations comprise a bookstore, a supplier of educational materials, and an alternative magazine publisher, all located in Toronto, Canada, and a small business development agency situated in London, England. At the time of my study, these organizations had been in existence for periods ranging from two to fifteen years. As a result, the case studies include substantial treatment of and reflection upon the developmental patterns of each group.

During my immersions in each organization, it became more and more clear to me that I was being given 'access' to the various meanings and manifestations that participants attached to the phenomenon of working co-operatively. It also became clear that understanding the culture of these organizations - co-operative or otherwise - required an

appreciation of their change and development patterns. These observations began to give shape to the analytical thrust of my thesis.

The third section of the dissertation attempts to document the evolution of my thinking during the research endeavour. This section, which has two chapters (7 and 8), moves the dissertation into introspective and analytical terrain by highlighting and exploring the puzzles, questions, confusions and learning that took place during my field experiences and concurrent reading of the literature.

Chapter 7 uses the cumulative experience gained from visiting all four of the organizations as a way of reflecting upon the field work. In order to give this process shape, I first propose, and then use, a model of learning that takes into account the action-reflection cycles that were so characteristic of my inquiry. In the chapter, I identify several learning cycles, each with moments of action, reflection and feedback.

At the conclusion of chapter 7, I outline the central puzzles and questions that remain unanswered and compelling at the completion of my field work. One of the key puzzles I identify is the apparent gap between my field observations and information I have gathered from the literature. Chapter 8, as a result, documents another learning cycle in which I review the literature in depth and discover some of the reasons for the gaps between my observations and those of other researchers and commentators. In addition to the literature specific to worker co-operatives, I draw from organizational theory more generally and conclude the chapter with an analytical perspective that incorporates a life-cycle metaphor.

Section IV of the dissertation, which has three chapters (9, 10 and 11), outlines the thesis that emerges after consideration of both the field site and library materials. Chapter 9 explicates my principle findings that, a) co-operative working is best understood at the level of culture, b) that it has different meanings in each group, and c) that it changes over time. In order to capture these processes and developments I employ the life-cycle metaphor.

Chapter 10 reaches some conclusions about the various meanings of co-operation at work and the way in which these meanings are enacted in organizations. The chapter concludes by highlighting the way in which sustaining a co-operative ethos is contingent upon a number of factors that seem to be generalizable, but that influence each organization in unique and situation-specific ways.

Chapter 11, the concluding one, reinvokes the original questions that initiated my research, discusses the issue of trustworthiness and outlines some of the implications for further research inherent in my findings. The dissertation concludes by referencing my overall learning and providing an indication of where these insights may take me insofar as future research plans and goals are concerned.

SECTION I

AN INQUIRY INTO CO-OPERATION AT WORK: ORGANIZATION THEORY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study is to learn about worker-managed organizations. In this section I am concerned with both the specific data collection methods that I used in the study and with the overall research framework or perspective that has informed and directed the entire inquiry. By research framework, I mean the assumptions, values, beliefs and theoretical stance that I have used to guide every aspect of the research, including the formulation of my original questions, my choice of ethnography, my approach to interpreting findings and the format I am using to write this dissertation. My objective in this section is to make explicit the foundations on which I journeyed from a position of curiosity toward a state of knowing and understanding something - in this case, about co-operation at work.

In order to achieve the goal of this section, the first chapter will identify and describe two prevailing trends in organizational inquiry, and indicate my preference for a naturalistic approach to research. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications this framework has had for organizing, implementing, sustaining and justifying my project. The second chapter in this section will describe the specific research methods that I used in the study, thus setting the scene for Section II of the thesis, which provides case studies of four worker-managed organizations.

CHAPTER 1

A NATURAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH

1.1 Understanding Organizations

There is no consensus about the best way to understand and describe the social world. The researcher must select from competing and conflicting world views that in turn give direction to all aspects of an inquiry. Most social scientists experience at least some tension and conflict between a world view that highlights the supremacy of inquiry modelled on natural science, on the one hand, and the necessity to contextualize and individualize the social world on the other. These two pulls are usually expressed as choices between the two paradigms of positivism and naturalism. Whether one chooses an extreme or some point in the middle, paradigmatic choice is the starting point for any research endeavour, and it is at this level that I will begin.

What is a paradigm? In its broadest sense it is an all encompassing world view: a way of understanding the world and making sense of observation, experience and sensation. Burrell and Morgan (1979) argue that a paradigm reflects assumptions related to ontology, epistemology and human nature.

Ontological assumptions have to do with beliefs about the objective or subjective nature of reality. In this regard, researchers assume positions relative to such questions as: is reality objective in nature or is it the product of human thinking; does reality exist independently and objectively, or only as a product of subjective human experience?

Epistemological assumptions have to do with beliefs about the basis of knowledge - assumptions made about how to understand the world and how to communicate this understanding to others. Burrell and Morgan (1979:1) point out that epistemological assumptions:

> entail ideas, for example, about what forms of knowledge can be obtained, and how one can sort out what is to be regarded as true from what is to be regarded as false...is it possible to identify and communicate the nature of knowledge as being hard, real and capable of being transmitted in tangible form?...or (is) knowledge of a softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind, based on experience and insight of a unique and essentially personal nature?

A third set of assumptions has to do with the researcher's understanding and view of human nature. At one extreme is a view of human nature as mechanistic and deterministic, responding in predictable and predetermined ways to environmental stimuli. At the other extreme, human nature is assumed to be subjectively created and therefore flexible, creative, voluntary, self-enacted and indeterminate.

The various positions taken by researchers relative to ontological, epistemological and human nature assumptions, all have consequences for the selection of research or inquiry methods. If one considers the social world to be an external, static, objective reality, then an investigation will probably focus on dissecting this reality, by analysing the relationships, regularities and irregularities between its various elements. In the words of Burrell and Morgan (1979:3), the concern, therefore,

> is with the identification and definition of these elements and with the discovery of ways in which these relationships can be expressed. The methodological issues of importance are thus the concepts themselves, their measurement and the identification of underlying themes. This perspective expresses itself most forcefully in a search for universal laws which explain and govern the reality which is being observed.

If, on the other hand, one considers reality to be subjectively created by participants, then an investigation will likely focus on understanding how people put together and create this social world. To quote Burrell and Morgan once again:

> in methodological terms it is an approach which emphasises the relativistic nature of the social world to such an extent that it may be perceived as anti-scientific. (Burrell and Morgan 1979:3)

Although I agree with Burrell and Morgan that there is a continuum of paradigms that reflect assumptions to do with ontology, epistemology and human nature, for discussion purposes it is more helpful to reduce this to two counter-opposed world views about research. Consequently, and at the risk of over-simplification, I will isolate two main research traditions in organizational inquiry - what I will call positivism and naturalism. I will use these as benchmarks or points of reference on which to fix my own position.

1.2 Positivism and Naturalism

Positivism assumes that the world is knowable in objective terms - that there is an objective reality that can be discovered and explained by laws, theories and linear casual relationships. Making these discoveries entails a marked preference for quantitative data collection using scientific methods. There is little if any attempt to link explanations and interpretations with subjective human experience, intentions or motives.

Naturalism, on the other hand, assumes that objective knowledge is unavailable - that reality shifts with each situation and is a product of voluntary human interaction and social constructions rather than

universal rules. In order to understand the nature of these constructions, the naturalist researcher seeks to capture the subjective human experience by using qualitative methods. Explanations for behaviour are always linked to human intentions, motives and subjectively-reported experience.

Although there have been attempts to reconcile and integrate positivism and naturalism, (Weber 1949; Denzin 1978), most researchers place themselves toward one or the other of the extremes, and consider the two approaches to be incompatible. As a result, each is conceived as the opposite of the other. In order to understand one, it is necessary to understand the other.

1.2.1 The positivistic paradigm

The creed of positivism can be conceptualized as a group of axioms (Lincoln and Guba 1985), or as a set of tenets (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983), that articulate the underlying assumptions to do with ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. Researchers informed by positivism assume that objective knowledge exists and can be objectively discovered. They believe that there is a single reality that can be segmented and broken down into quantifiable units or variables that can be independently studied and for which causal relationships can be identified. In this way, it is believed that the various aspects of organizational behaviour can be described and linked to particular causes. Once the casual relationship is 'known', it is believed that predictions can be made about the situations in which certain behaviour will recur. In this way, positivists assume that for every action there

is a corresponding cause. As a result, positivism takes its logic from the model of physical science and applies this logic to the social world.

Central to the positivist's position is the notion that researcher and subject can remain separate. As a result, it is assumed that it is both desirable and possible for researchers to 'keep their distance'. In order to maintain distance, the positivist researcher uses mainly quantitative tools such as surveys, questionnaires and structured interviews that include an explicit outline of the research procedures to be used. These explicit procedures are thought to allow for replication of the research and thus establish the reliability of the findings. By emphasizing distance, through the use of standardized and predetermined research methods, the positivist believes it is possible to be neither affected by nor affecting to the subject under study. What is generated, as a result, is 'objective' knowledge.

The majority of organizational research has taken place within a positivistic, scientific perspective which assumes there is an external, objective reality that can be isolated and measured with minimal regard for setting (Halfpenny 1979, 1982). This perspective is most noticeable in research reports that make hypotheses about 'organizational reality', then predict what variables influence it, and then subject these predictions to testing with scientific methods, Conclusions are drawn which are deemed to be valid and reliable.

1.2.2 The naturalist paradigm

In the past two decades there has been considerable interest in alternative ways of understanding the social world in general and organizations in particular. A growing number of researchers have become suspicious of the orthodox view that organizations can best be understood by using a positivistic perspective. To this group, of which I am a member, the positivist approach, with its search for an objective reality and universal rules, has failed to capture and illuminate the substance, nuance, interrelatedness and totality of organizational life. In a search for more meaningful ways to study and understand organizations, researchers such as myself have parted company with pure science, and eclectically selected from a number of sources including cultural anthropology, humanist psychology, philosophy and education. This more subjective approach (what I call naturalism) does not have a single title, but is recognized and signaled by a variety of terms:

'naturalistic inquiry' (Lincoln and Guba 1985)

'new paradigm research' (Reason and Rowan 1981)

'postpositivism' (Heron 1981)

'nonorthodoxy' (Clark 1985)

'qualitative methodology' (Here, a distinction is made between qualitative research methods, which both naturalist and positivist researchers may use, and qualitative methodology, which, in context, refers to a underlying approach to both data collection and interpretation). (Silverman 1985; Bogdan and Taylor 1984; Fineman and Mangham 1983)

'action research' (Sanford 1981; Jones 1987)

'phenomenology' (Valle 1978; Schultz 1967)

'interpretive research' (Giddens 1976)

'interpretive interactionism (Denzin 1978)

'symbolic interactionism (Blumer (1969)

'ethnomethodology' (Garfinkel 1967).

These ideas converge in a rejection of positivism - in a generalized view of the world as a subjective arena, and a preference for qualitative research methods (such as in-depth interviewing and participant-observation). Like positivism, naturalistic inquiry is based on a particular set of ontological, epistemological, human nature and methodological assumptions. As its starting point, naturalism is a critique of the axioms of positivism and is deliberately non-scientific. Egon Guba (1985) writes of this challenge to positivism by outlining five counterindications to the major tenets of natural science. He asserts that naturalism is:

1) Against 'naive realism' (a term he borrows from Mary Hesse [1980]), and for a view of reality as 'mental phenomena', which exists only (and holistically) in the minds of individual people, rather than as an externally determined given;
2) Against subject-object dualism and for subject-object integration;
3) Against generalizability and for a view that everything is contextual and specific;
4) Against precise causality and for a view that observed social phenomena are mutually causal and that everything is interdependent;
5) Against value independence and for a belief that research is inherently value-bound.

Thus, naturalistic researchers assume that objective knowledge is not available and stress the subjective experience of individuals. As such, the naturalist believes that there are multiple realities, subjectively-constructed, within each social setting, available only by considering the whole organization. These socially constructed realities shift and change both inter-and intra-organizationally and thus cannot be predicted before an inquiry or controlled during research. To the naturalist, the only way to understand an organization is to become immersed in its world and inquire into whole systems, searching for patterns, interrelationships and interdependencies. According to Diesing (1972:10):

> The holistic approach includes the belief that human systems tend to develop a characteristic wholeness or integrity. They are not simply a loose collection of (variables); they have a unity that manifests itself in nearly every part.

For the naturalist, everything is interwoven and mutually interdependent. It is neither desirable nor necessary to distinguish between cause and effect. The overriding goal of the research is to provide a contextually-bound picture of what is going on and to illuminate as much as possible how the organization has constructed itself. Yvonna Lincoln (1985:228) suggests that:

> the task for the researcher involves at minimum, an idea switch that moves us from asking, 'are you doing what you're supposed to be doing?' to 'what are you doing?'

Another naturalistic inquirer, Denzin (1978), recommends that this type of research should attempt to bring to light the world of an organization without constant reference to pre-imagined rules, boundaries or relationships (such as notions about success or failure and their likely causes).

In order to understand whole systems and whole organizations, naturalistic inquirers favour qualitative research methods such as participant-observation, in-depth open-ended interviewing and ethnography. These are methods that allow the researcher to interact with the field site as collaboratively and intimately as possible. The purpose is to collect what Geertz (1975) has termed 'thick descriptions' of the way people create and sustain a social experience. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:6) point out that:

> a first requirement of [naturalist] social research... is fidelity to the phenomena under study, not to any particular set of methodological principles ... [In this way] we can come to interpret the world in the same way as [the people being studied].

Central to naturalism, then, is the letting-go of attitudes and values borrowed from physical science. There is little, if any, attempt to structure an inquiry around standardized methods - research projects are given the freedom to react and respond to the world under investigation. The researcher does not pretend to be objective and analytically disinterested, but acknowledges his or her subjective experience as a valid and revealing source of information and discovery. The researcher's gradual learning of the social situation and culture being visited is considered critical data. In this way, the researcher, as he or she is learning, takes the time to record and check out what others are already taking for granted. The result is that there cannot be a preordained researcher-subject relationship; of necessity that relationship is shaped by the social setting under study. Naturalists are inclined to conceptualize research as being <u>with</u> rather than <u>on</u> people, even though the nature of such a contract is situational.

That said, some naturalists do have a preference for particular

types of relationships. For example, Reason (1985) aims for a co-operative and egalitarian partnership, and Fineman (1983), on the basis of his study of white collar unemployment, found that a therapeutic, helping and consultative researcher persona was the most useful. What is always appropriate in a naturalistic inquiry is for the researcher to be authentic, adaptable and flexible to the situation and to be clear in any field reports about the roles assumed by everyone involved in the research.

1.3 My Paradigm

I have already identified myself as affiliated with naturalism rather than positivism. I have come to realize that my belief system has its roots in both a critical assessment of the thinking and writing of other social scientists and in my personal experiences as an organizational participant and researcher.

I believe that humans are what Mead (1934) and Geertz (1975; 1983) have pictured as animals suspended in 'webs of significance' that they themselves have spun. The spider web metaphor usefully conjures up an image of complexity, interrelatedness, self-creation and intention. Use of this metaphor reinforces the idea that humans use thoughts and feelings to create, interpret and give meaning to their social world, and are not simply products of predestiny. The metaphor also signals the possibility that there is more than one web and that each web may have different connections and meanings. Knowing one web, therefore, does not imply knowing all webs: understanding the social world is about how webs get spun to become meaningful and significant to

participants.

Another phrase that captures many of my beliefs is 'social construction', a term popularized by Berger and Luckmann (1967). According to this view, humans create or construct their social world in unique ways that have special meaning for the participants. Weick (1979) pictures this as a process of 'enactment', in which organizational members enact and create a world or culture that encompasses their own special blend of symbols, myths, rituals, customs and codes. Although I take this to be the case, I also believe that individuals are not usually conscious of the ways in which they enact or construct their social world.

Organizations, too, are characterized by tacit understandings about what various symbols, words and actions mean. For me, the central goal of social research is to aim for an understanding about the unique way in which an organization becomes meaningful to participants, and the way in which these understandings are arrived at. I believe that this research goal can best be achieved by becoming directly involved with the ideas, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of organizational members in order to become engaged with the formation of meanings, a process often referred to as 'interpretive research'. Linda Smircich (1983a:16) comments on this type of research in the following way:

> The interpretive paradigm presents the view that organizations are socially constructed systems of shared meaning. This view stresses that the possibility of organized action hinges on the emergence and continued existence of common modes of interpretation which allow day to day activities to become taken for granted.

My interpretive approach searches for what Geertz (1975) and Denzin (1978) call, 'thickly contextualized meaning structures'. In addition,

I am concerned with the way in which these meanings are interdependent and interrelated. My perspective, in other words, is holistic and encompassing rather than segmented and divided. McLean (1987:11) helps to bring this idea together by suggesting that interpretive researchers are:

> seeking to discover how people habitually make sense of their organizations, the common-sense understandings that they hold about how things are done around here. What [people] might ignore is as important in this process as discovering the dominant frames they bring to understanding what they see.

I embrace this interpretive and situational view of organizational behaviour, not only because it provides me with a scholarly justification, but also because it resonates so profoundly with my personal experience as an organizational participant. During my working experiences in hospitals and universities, I have been impressed with the way organizations of these two types differ both from each other and within the same category. While hospitals can be generally thought to treat the sick and universities to teach and do research, beyond these extremely general distinctions each organization I have worked in (and undertaken research in) is a remarkably different culture. To carry assumptions gleaned from one organization into another (even of the same general type such as a hospital) is, in my experience, almost always a mistake. What is deemed reality must be learned.

So, whatever the setting, I have learned to individualize rather than generalize. I have learned that the interplay of factors varies with each situation, and carrying assumptions about what is important or pivotal in one location into a different setting usually results in a false start. I have also observed that individuals (in addition to

organizations) have substantial differences in meaning construction. My view of an event, situation or incident, can be quite different from the views held by other organizational participants, who may root their views in phenomena that had not entered my mind. What I have concluded is that all individuals (including myself) have a unique experience of the world around them, incorporating a socially constructed view of reality that is often obtained through negotiation with others. Formal meetings provide a good example as they very often entail open negotiation over the nature of problems, the nature of causes and the nature of conclusions. Most reality negotiation, however, is less explicit and involves continuous informal and often implicit negotiation, and it is for this reason that a researcher must engage as intimately as possible with organizational participants.

Choosing a naturalist paradigm for organizational inquiry has implications for every aspect of research. Unlike the positivist paradigm, however, there are few universal assumptions, rules and principles that guide and contain a project from start to finish. One of the characteristics of naturalism is to reject absolute rules and principles; projects are allowed to change and designs to emerge at each phase of an inquiry. Research becomes responsive to and shaped by the social setting being considered. In this way, the researcher although not powerless, is more inclined to be submissive and impressionable. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:6) suggest that:

> where positivism stresses hypothesis-testing, and in particular the role of crucial experiments, naturalism portrays research as a process of exploration.

The goal is to understand how people behave and how they give their

actions meaning and significance - how they shape and construct their reality. The researcher sets out to glean an appreciation of what it is like to be in their world.

Critical to the naturalist approach is recognizing the reflexive nature of social research and acknowledging the fact that the researcher becomes part of the social world being studied. In this way, many of the 'tools' of the naturalist inquirer are the same ones that are used in everyday life: looking, observing, reading, thinking, questioning, speculating and conversing. The difference is that the researcher makes the added commitment to document all this information, reflectively consider what the links, themes and patterns are like, check with organizational participants for agreement, and report the findings.

To recap, my personal experience and intellectual view of organizational life come together within the naturalistic paradigm. To me, understanding my own method of social learning and adaptation is not far removed from how I approach an understanding of a 'foreign' culture as a researcher. My paradigm is to consider reality as subjective and changing, rather than external and tangible. My epistemology rejects a search for universal truths and seeks to understand from the inside rather than the outside. Mine is essentially a subjective rather than an objective enterprise. My view of human nature is that it is indeterminate and voluntaristic rather than determinate. For me, qualitative research methods are almost always the appropriate choice for data collection. These beliefs are the foundations on which this dissertation has been constructed.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that it is necessary for the researcher to enter and explore deeply a social unit under investigation. The goal of such research is to observe and understand the visible and audible patterns of behaviour, as well as the deeper, often taken-for-granted, underlying basic assumptions that inform and direct social activity. For many researchers, including myself, this is a process that can be characterized as the illumination and discovery of organizational culture. Although this chapter will be primarily concerned with the specific methods I used to undertake research of this kind with several worker-managed organizations, I will first consider some of the debates that have taken place around the concept of organizational culture. This is necessary because culture has come to have a variety of meanings and I wish to be clear about the epistemological traditions that have informed my choice of methodologies.

I will begin the chapter with a brief overview of the concept of organizational culture. I will consider some of the frameworks that have been used for understanding and exploring organizational culture, highlighting not only the diversity, but also the strengths and weaknesses of the concept. From this review I will isolate my own position regarding the meaning of organizational culture and then I will

discuss the specific research methods that I employed in this research project.

2.2 What Is Organizational Culture?

The idea that contemporary work organizations have idiosyncratic cultures, and that understanding and describing these cultures is an important goal of research, has been around for a long time, but has gained considerable credence and popularity in the last two decades. Silverman (1970), for example, in his important book, The Theory of Organizations, suggested that organizations were 'societies writ small', and Argyris and Schon (1978) suggested that organizations have 'cognitive processes', and 'distinct personalities'. Turner (1971), Handy (1976) and Pettigrew (1979) are other writers from the 1970's who recommend the investigation of organizational culture as an important analytical device. Following on these earlier voices, the 1980's witnessed a surge of writing and an unprecedented endorsement and promotion of the 'cultural' idea by both the popular business press and the academic community. In a 1980 article, Business Week recommended the idea of 'Corporate Culture: The Hard-to-change Values that Spell Success or Failure' to its nearly half a million readers, and in 1981, the popular business magazine, Fortune, initiated a section called 'Corporate Cultures'. In addition, in 1982, several books concerned with culture in organizations were able to bridge the business and academic communities, finding their way onto the international best sellers lists, as well as reading lists for many college and university courses in the social sciences (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Peters and

Waterman 1982). During the early 1980's as well, many articles concerned with organizational culture appeared in periodicals aimed more directly at the scholarly community. In 1983, for example, Administrative Science Quarterly published a special issue devoted exclusively to the topic of 'organizational culture', and in 1984, Organizational Studies, published what was to become a classic on the subject, by Allaire and Firsirotu. By the mid-1980's, the term, 'organizational culture', had been incorporated into the lexicon of a diverse group of people: company presidents, nurses, consultants, television and media personalities, union leaders, business school professors, and social scientists generally.

Although use of the term organizational culture has become well established as a conversational device and as a dominant theme in the various literatures to do with contemporary work organizations, there has been, and continues to be, confusion and debate about what it actually means, what purpose it is intended to serve, and how it should be investigated and reported.

There is general agreement that organizational culture has to do with the legends, myths, rites, rituals, shared symbols and customs that a group of people employ in their work world. As Meek (1988) points out, however, there has been a tendency on the part of some commentators (particularly the popular business press) to make superficial these qualities of organizational life by ignoring the deeper, shared values and beliefs that are less visible and often more complex. Meek (1988:469) suggests that 'there has been a tendency for some researchers to treat organizational culture as a variable that can be controlled and

manipulated like any other variable', rather than to view it in multifaceted and holistic terms, beyond the capacity of any one individual (such as a company president) to manipulate, change or control at will. To some commentators, Meek ascribes the term, 'tricksters', suggesting that they have side-stepped the depth and complexity of the cultural idea, partly, she suggests, because they have failed to acknowledge the theoretical underpinnings of the concept. Other scholars, such as Smircich (1983) and Allaire and Firsirotu (1984), argue in a similar vein, agreeing with Meek that culture is not merely the pattern of behaviour that might be observed in ritualistic events, company slogans, office arrangements, or day-to-day work activities. Smircich (1983:347) states her view in this way:

> [I] leave behind the view that a culture is something an organization 'has', in favour of the view that culture is something an organization 'is'. Culture as a 'root metaphor' promotes a view of organizations as expressive forms, manifestations of human consciousness...the research agenda stemming from this perspective...is to investigate the patterns that make organized action possible.

By way of explanation, Meek (1988:454) suggests that 'the idea of culture in organizations is a concept borrowed mostly from anthropology', and, as with most things borrowed, 'some key concepts have become overlooked, distorted and stereotyped in the transfer.' Allaire and Firsirotu (1984:185) provide the same point of reference, and recommend that anyone seriously interested in organizational culture must first reach an informed understanding of its theoretical underpinnings within the field of cultural anthropology. They point out that anthropologists have used the concept of culture in a variety of ways, some using it to refer to 'sociocultural systems', others using it

to refer to 'ideational systems'.

> Cultural anthropologists have proposed diverse and complex theories of culture that may be characterized by their particular assumptions, slants and emphases. A first and critical distinction is drawn between those theorists who view culture as meshed into the social system and those who conceive of it as a conceptually separate, ideational system. In the former view, the cultural and social realms are integrated into a sociocultural system...manifest behaviour is the product of this sociocultural system. [In the latter view,] a conceptual and analytical distinction between social systems and cultural systems [is made]. This distinction leads to a conceptualization of culture as a system of ideas, or as inferred ideational codes lying behind the realm of observable events.

Allaire and Firsirotu (1984:197) believe that 'culture as a sociocultural system was the prevailing view of anthropologists of an earlier period' - a view incorporating the functionalist and structuralist schools of thought. This way of thinking, they posit, results in a view of culture as an interconnected component of the social system, manifested in behaviour and products of behaviour.

> In this tradition, research and theories tend to centre on the structures, functioning and evolutionary processes of these sociocultural systems, and on the development of typologies to explain [them]...the symbolic and formal aspects of organizations are assumed to be attuned and mutually supportive at all time [and] little attention is paid to the possible dissonance or incongruence between cultural and sociostructural aspects (Allaire and Firsirotu 1984:199).

Alternatively, a view more prevalent with contemporary cultural anthropologists is that culture is its own ideational system, manifest in unique cognitive structures, processes or products. In this conceptualization, culture is understood as the product of people's minds, manifest in the form of shared meanings and symbols, emerging from social interaction.

> Culture concepts of the ideational kind shift considerably the nature and emphasis of the enquiry into organizational culture. Culture, then, is made up the culture-bearers 'theories of the world' and symbolic products. Culture is a dynamic, symbol-laden context, a set

of functional cognitions or a deep, unconscious structure of mind. As a result, the contemporary view recommends that an investigation of culture must reckon with the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of organizational activity, and search for the underlying psychological and social architecture that gives rise to shared attitudes, beliefs, values and observable behaviour.

I agree with this conceptualization of culture as an ideational system, and it is consistent with the naturalistic paradigm I outlined in Chapter 1. As a result, research aimed at uncovering organizational culture must not only explore the observable and audible behaviour, but must also search for the basic assumptions that underlay and inform these behaviours, and come to terms with any inconsistencies and contradictions between espoused and operative values and attitudes.

Schneider and Shrivastava (1988:494) offer the advice that,

> Basic assumptions represent a system of shared meaning that governs collective perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions. Basic assumptions are expressed in values and beliefs that explain and validate what is (phenomenological) and what should be (normative). These values and beliefs are subsequently articulated in stories, symbols, and behaviors which in turn reinforce, institutionalize, and promote organization-wide sharing. Implicit in these [basic assumptions] are views of self, world, and others as good/bad, strong/weak, active/passive. The sources of basic assumptions are the psychodynamics created by the interaction of conscious and unconscious forces at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

In other words, basic assumptions are created and negotiated intersubjectively from within the organization, and may reside at the taken-for-granted or unconscious level. Acquiring an understanding of these basic assumptions, therefore, requires the researcher to reach an appreciation of the 'ideational system' lying within the minds of organizational participants, paying particular attention to the

cognitive and symbolic dimensions. The cognitive dimension, in this sense, includes exploration of the way in which reality is organized as a system of knowledge, shared perceptions, beliefs and judgments about the nature and meaning of the internal and external environment. The symbolic dimension requires exploration of the way in which culture is manifest as a product of the mind and reflected symbolically in such things as language and communication patterns (Turner 1986a). Research into organizational culture must therefore strive to uncover the shared beliefs and assumptions that have emerged out of both historical and contemporary interactions; the ones that ultimately influence the way in which social actors reach consensus, make decisions, create myths and go about their day-to-day activity.

Schein (1981; 1983; 1984; 1985), has a view of the concept of organizational culture that is similar to my own and that incorporates the ideas I have just presented. He instructs that,

> The term 'culture' should be reserved for the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken-for-granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment. These assumptions and beliefs are learned responses to a group's problems of survival in its external environment and its problems of internal regulation...this deeper level of assumptions is to be distinguished from the 'artifacts' and 'values' that are manifestations or surface levels of the culture but not the essence of culture (Schein 1985:6).

Schein recommends that research into organizational culture needs to address three levels of investigation and analysis (even though the deeper level is the most critical for a cogent report). The first level, what Schein characterizes as 'artifacts', is concerned with the visible patterns of behaviour, including such things as the physical environment, written and spoken language and jargon, dress codes,

technology and overt behaviour. Schein characterizes a second level as 'values', encompassing the theories and explanations that members use to explain, rationalize and justify their behaviour that is observed at the first level. Level two includes mission statements, philosophies, ideologies, ethical and moral codes and attitudes. According to Schein, these encompass the values and beliefs that participants are usually able to articulate during interviews and conversations, and that are often documented in written form as memos, annual reports, minutes of meetings and personnel policies. Schein cautions that a researcher should be alert to inconsistencies and contradictions in the information obtained at this level because it

> May also come to be seen only as what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called 'espoused values', which predict well enough what people will say in a variety of situations but which may be out of line with what they will actually do in a situation where those values should be operating (Schein 1985:17).

Schein suggests that information obtained at level one and two, although vitally important in organizational analysis, fails to penetrate fully the culture. To acquire a deeper level of understanding one must probe for the basic underlying assumptions, what he characterizes as the third level of organizational culture. Schein (1985:18) comments:

> What I am calling basic assumptions are congruent with what Argyris and Schon (1978) have identified as 'theories-in-use', the implicit assumptions that actually guide behaviour, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things...[they] tend to be nonconfrontable and nondebatable.

This level may include shared values, ideas and philosophies that are too painful or controversial to acknowledge openly; shared belief patterns that are so ingrained that only their manifestations are

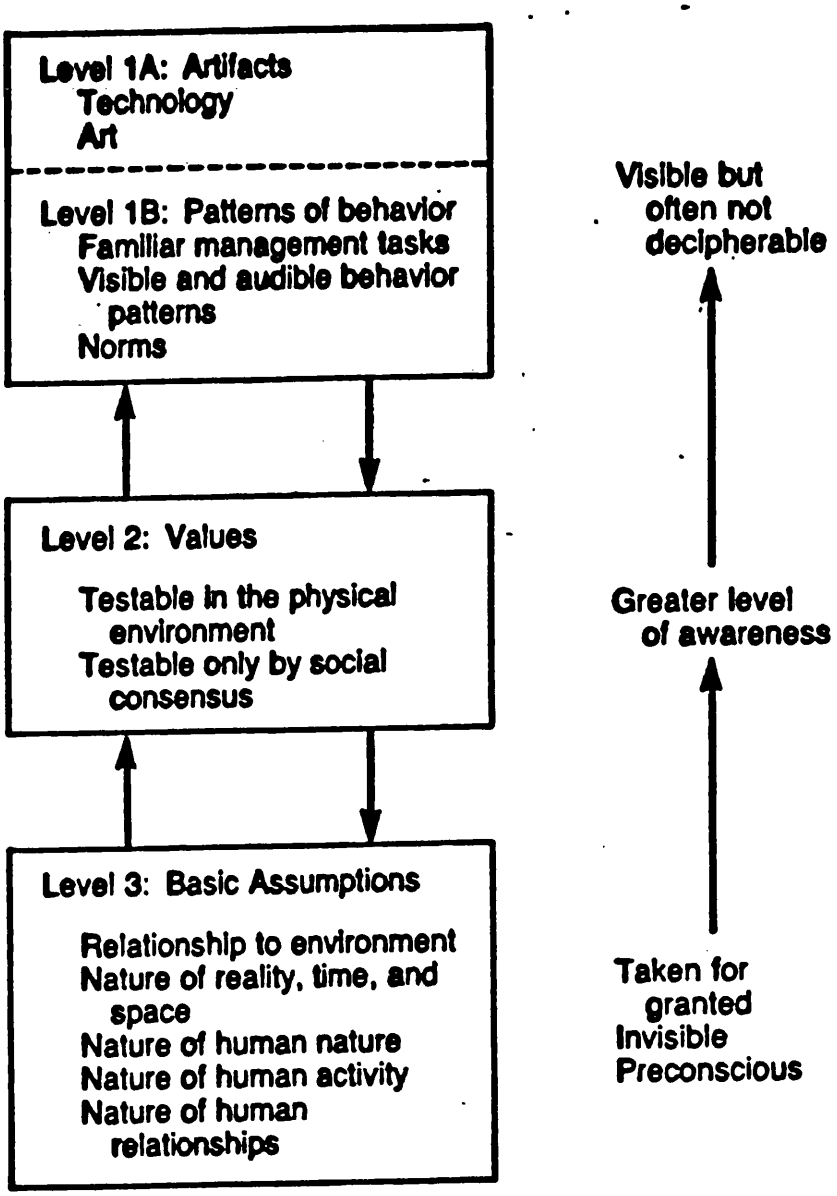
recognizable; shared ideas and values that may not be apparent or acknowledged by those using them. Acquiring knowledge at this deep level, as a result, may help to explain what initially seems irrational, ironical, inconsistent or paradoxical.

Schein's three levels of organizational culture, then, are somewhat analogous to an iceberg. At the top are those aspects of organizational life that are visible and audible and can be discerned fairly easily through disciplined observation and conversation. Next, is the level of values and formal explanations, a level that may be somewhat hidden from easy access. Level three, what Schein (1985:14) describes as 'the essence of what culture really is', may be invisible, taken-for-granted and unconscious. By way of summary, I have outlined Schein's levels of organizational culture in Figure 2.1 as it has been characterized by a student of his, Steven Ott (1989).

As I have pointed out, some researchers limit their inquiry to understanding organizational culture at Levels 1 and 2, and for these people the use of a limited number of interviews, consultations and perhaps a couple of days on site has been sufficient. To get to a deeper level of understanding, however, more intensive and extensive organizational engagements are recommended - engagements that are able to build rapport and trust with the group and to track communication and decision making patterns over time. To do this, an ethnographic approach is often the method of choice as this research strategy is more likely to provide information about the 'complex web' of human interaction and reality construction; better able to uncover the underlying basic assumptions.

Figure 2.1

Levels of Organizational Culture and their Interactions



Source: Ott, S. (1989). The Organizational Culture Perspective. Pacific Grove (CA): Brooks/Cole Publishing. p. 62

Aspiring to understand organizational culture at all three levels, I began my study with the goal of using ethnography as my primary research technique and the balance of this chapter will outline and discuss the specific research methods that I employed.

2.3 Research Methods

The methodological implications of applying a naturalistic paradigm to uncover organizational culture is quite well described and discussed in the work of Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba. (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Lincoln 1985). These two researchers have outlined a characteristic flow or development that takes place during a naturalistic inquiry, through the stages of research design, data collection, data analysis, reporting and trustworthiness.

Providing a useful summary of Lincoln and Guba's work is Skrtic (1985), who outlines the typical methodological implications for each stage of a naturalistic inquiry. A modified version of his model is presented in Figure 2.2.

Without treating Skrtic's model as orthodoxy for all naturalistic inquiry, I believe that it recommends a useful and coherent way to review and consider the research methods that I have used in this study. However, I would stress that the thesis has been one of discovery and emergent design, and as a result I will be referring to methodological issues and research dilemmas throughout the dissertation. In particular, during an introduction to each case study, I will provide more detail on the specific issues to do with entry and research methods.

Figure 2.2

Methodological Implications of Naturalistic Inquiry

Aspect of Inquiry	Implication
Research design	Natural setting Emergent design Problem-determined boundaries Purposive sampling
Data Collection	Qualitative methods Human instrument Tacit knowledge
Data Analysis	Grounded theory Inductive data analysis
Reporting	Case study reporting mode Idiographic interpretation
Trustworthiness	Special criteria for trustworthiness Negotiated results

2.3.1 Research design

Many research projects begin with assumptions about what needs to be proven or disproved. As Bogdan and Taylor (1984:16) point out, this is not the design of choice for naturalistic inquiry:

> Until we enter the field, we do not know what questions to ask or how to ask them. In other words, the preconceived image we have of the people we intend to study may be naive, misleading, or downright false... Most [inquirers] enter the field without specific hypotheses or preconceptions.

The field that is entered, therefore, should be a natural one, not a laboratory or in any way removed from the normal and usual one of the subject. Lincoln and Guba (1985:189) assert that:

> (naturalistic) inquiry must be carried out in a natural setting because phenomena of study, whatever they may be...take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves.

In keeping with these ideas, I began my research anxious to enter the on-site world of worker-managed organizations with as open and curious a mind as possible. My perspective was like that of going on a trip or voyage to a new country: I did not deny that I was likely to be carrying some previously-acquired concepts, but I was quite keen to suspend my judgement as much as possible.

My plan was to locate several worker-managed organizations to 'see what was to be seen'. My inquiry was driven by a desire to learn about organizations that were ostensibly committed to co-operative working relationships. I wanted to know what sort of individuals were drawn to these workplaces, how the work got done, what the work routines were like, how the jobs normally associated with managers got done or did not get done, what the forces were that brought people together to work in

this way, what sustained and maintained the social setting, and what kinds of problems or dilemmas they confronted. In short, I began my inquiry wanting to know everything.

As I have mentioned previously, I decided in advance that I would limit my inquiry to about five organizations with the following characteristics:

1) workplaces with a public definition of themselves as non-hierarchical and co-operatively managed;
2) workplaces where the primary source of economic livelihood for members was the organization itself;
3) workplaces that had been in existence for several years before my study.

My initial design was very simple: to go into the field and observe worker-managed organizations. I began my formal research programme in October 1985 and became engaged with my first field site in November 1985.

Although I did not use the literature as a way of generating hypotheses or locating testing instruments, even at the beginning I was reading widely. I was interested in discovering the trends and traditions in thinking to do with worker-managed organizations and I visualized my field work and my reading as being complementary and interdependent: my reading generated questions for the field and my field work gave direction to much of my reading.

2.3.2 Data collection

Central to the tenets of naturalistic inquiry and the discovery of organizational culture is the employment of qualitative research methods such as ethnography, in-depth, open-ended interviewing, and participant-observation for the collection of data. I have already presented the main arguments supporting these strategies and they are well rehearsed by a number of authors such as Glaser and Strauss (1967), Bogdan and Taylor (1984), Spradley (1980), and Silverman (1985). Typical appeals are that only qualitative research can provide the richness of detail to produce cultural portraits. According to Filstead (1970:26):

> qualitative methodology allows the researcher to get close to the data thereby developing the analytical, conceptual and categorical components of explanation from the data itself - rather than from the preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed.

Complementing and supporting the supremacy of qualitative methods for naturalistic inquiry is the notion of the human-as-instrument. In this approach, the human is the primary research 'tool', rather than a questionnaire, survey instrument or rigid set of interview questions; only the human has the wherewithal to detect, assimilate and collect the totality of social information. Lincoln and Guba (1985:193) outline seven characteristics that qualify humans as the instruments of choice:

1) responsiveness to personal and environmental cues;

2) adaptability to collect information about multiple factors - and at multiple levels - simultaneously;

3) holistic emphasis that allows grasping the whole picture, while acknowledging the parts;

4) ability to function simultaneously in the domains of

propositional and tacit knowledge;

5) the ability to process data as soon as it becomes available;

6) the ability to clarify, correct and amplify data on the spot;

7) the ability to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses.

In keeping with my preference for qualitative methods and using myself as the primary research instrument for data collection, I was committed from the beginning to the use of ethnography. The primary method of ethnography is to participate and observe inside an organization. Spradley (1980:54) suggests that participant-observation differs from ordinary observation in the following ways:

1) dual purpose: participating in social activity and taking the dual roles of researcher-observer;
2) explicit awareness: attention to all the details of social activity;

3) wide angle lens: attention to what may appear to be peripheral social activity;

4) insider-outsider frame of reference: being on the 'inside', and at the same time taking the time to reflect and assimilate information on the 'outside';

5) introspection: validation of feelings and thoughts of researcher;

6) record keeping: extensive documentation of observed social activity.

My choice of field sites was a function of both serendipity and conscious choice. As I was attending university in Bath, my first hope was to find several organizations in the city itself. My initial inquiries soon led me to discover that with a couple of exceptions, Bath is a city with very few organizations of the type I wanted to understand. The main wholefood outlet proudly announces on its

store-front and delivery trucks that it is a workers' co-operative, but all my attempts to gain access, even for a brief meeting, proved futile. I then approached a group of psychotherapists who were willing to have me attend their meetings, but I felt that their practice was more of a loose partnership providing a secondary source of income for most of the therapists, than a group fitting within my criteria.

I next turned to the larger city of Bristol, twelve miles down the road. My initial contact was with the Avon Co-operative Development Agency, which in turn directed me to an organization calling itself 'The Southwest Co-operative Group'. This group turned out to be a self-support organization for twelve worker co-operatives in the county of Avon. As it turned out, all but one of the co-operatives that were part of the group felt that the timing and circumstances were in some way inappropriate for a researcher to be on site.

The remaining organization, a group of architects called Quattro Design (QD), agreed to a group interview, and they subsequently became the first workgroup I had any contact with. I discovered that QD was a legally registered worker co-operative, formed in 1983 by four architects who had previously been part of an in-house design team at a housing association in the southwest of England. As a result, they said that they had been good friends and co-workers for over a decade before starting their new business.

The offices for QD gave an instant sense of welcome. The work space was small and open-concept, bright with lots of plants. The room was divided into four work areas with a coffee table and comfy chairs defining a middle section. The walls of the office were covered with

flow charts and architectural sketches that provided an overview of the budget, time-table, design sketches and associated problems for every current project.

The four staff members at QD, all in their late thirties, told me that they received equal wages and benefits and met fortnightly as a group to discuss all matters to do with the business. Each of the main projects has one person responsible for co-ordination and leadership, even though everyone tends to get involved at some stage.

The members of the organization generally considered themselves successful, from both a financial and a social perspective. They told me that they thought the secret of their success was that they liked each other - enough, they said, to be brutally frank if that was necessary. Nevertheless, they were not long in telling me that they thought they had a very big problem before them. They described it this way:

> Right now our biggest problem is too much work. We are having a lot of trouble deciding if we should expand, and that is a really hard decision for us to make. I think that size can destroy this kind of workgroup. It is really hard and time consuming to keep everyone involved when a group gets over, I'd say five, to make it work. You begin to spend too much time dealing with yourself as a group. It would be really hard for a new person to come into the co-op at this stage - they'd be a real stranger. Size usually means you start thinking about dividing up the tasks and then you have to decide who does the scut work. The scut work now? The issue for us to do with growth is deciding if we might hire someone to do the office work or hire someone like us - to be an all purpose architect. If we hired someone to do the office work, that would ease our workload and we could manage without additional professional staff. But what would we do with the office worker? Are they equal? Do they get the same pay? None of us want to deal with those kinds of issues, so we aren't making a decision. If we had a friend out there looking for work and wanting to be part of our set-up, that would simplify things a lot. We're using a compromise at the moment. We bring in a part-time secretary every so often. But nobody knows where she fits in - is she part of the group? Do we divide up things such that someone does these things full-time?

When I explored further the issue of growth with the group, they expressed their concerns in cultural terms. They said that they feared growth and the addition of staff would somehow bring with it a transformation in what they had come to know and understand as 'co-operative working'. I found it fascinating that the group framed the idea of growth as a dilemma - most small businesses, it seemed to me, would have been overjoyed at the prospect. When I thought about it, though, I realized that I had not given much thought to this aspect of worker co-operatives, and that perhaps QD was not unique in this regard. Did worker co-operatives change over time? Why? In what ways? What was the impact of change on the culture? Did the meaning of co-operative working change over time? Once I was engaged with other organizations, I came to realize that these were important and pertinent questions indeed.

In the winter of 1986 I returned to my home country of Canada in order to tidy-up some business affairs and to fulfil an obligation to teach a one semester course at the University of Toronto. My original intention was to talk to a few worker co-ops in the city as a way of staying in touch with the substantive focus of my research, although my original vision was that all the formal case studies would be British. However, I soon found myself with three organizations of exactly the type I wanted to study, all of whom were keen and willing to provide me with ethnographic access. My intuition suggested to me that having information about organizations of this type from more than one country would add an interesting dimension to the study, although I believed that the political, economic and cultural similarities between English

Canada and Britain would make organizational comparisons possible.

When I returned to Bath in June 1986, I was not sure if I needed to visit another organization or not, but again serendipity entered into the picture. One day I noticed an advertisement for a temporary, six-month training post with a worker co-operative development agency in London. It seemed too good a possibility to ignore, so I applied for the job with the understanding that I also wanted clearance to be an ethnographer. Both the organization's and my own goals seemed compatible and as a result, a development agency in central London became the fifth workplace in my study, one in which I was able to combine the roles of employee, participant and observer.

I used a variety of data collection techniques with the four main research sites, including:

1) one or more open-ended interviews with most members of the work group, focusing in particular on their motivations to work in the organization and discovering their view of organizational life;
2) group interviews and attendance at group meetings;
3) observation of day-to-day activities;
4) informal discussion with individuals and groups;
5) reviews of written documents such as annual reports, constitutions, bylaws, minutes of meetings, funding proposals, memoranda, newsletters, promotional materials, financial statements and client/customer documentation.

I have already mentioned that the ethnographer sets out to collect as much data as possible, working with the premise that everything is

important, regardless of how trivial it seems at the time. Like many others before me, I found this an enormous and stressful task. Over time and with the benefit of the experience I gained with each site, I found my data recording and collection began to take a predictable form, falling into the following categories:

1) interview notes and transcripts;
2) general notes and descriptions: the who, what, where, when and why of an event or incident;
3) shared language, special meanings: the jargon, actual words and expressions being used by participants, with notes on the contextual nature of the dialogue;
4) my speculative and theoretical musing: my interpretation of events;
5) my feelings (how I felt before, during and after events;
6) comments from participants when I talked about what I thought was going on;
7) formal documents from the research site: minutes of meetings, reports, correspondence, etc.;
8) my personal correspondence: my letters (especially to Canada) that seemed to be a hodgepodge of information, often including bits of data not recorded elsewhere;
9) diary notes: personal comments about my life, health and events external to the field site.

By collecting information in such a variety of categories, I was usually able to obtain an overall picture of events and occurrences from several different sources and angles - a strategy referred to as

triangulation (Silverman 1985; Denzin 1978). Thus, for each organization I tried to obtain a rounded and multiperspective portrait of the 'reality' within each workplace.

As I have pointed out, the field work for this thesis was completed between November 1985 and April 1987 and the case studies, as a result, reflect the experience of each organization up until that time. However, by the time I was near the end of writing-up I felt that a final check-in with each group would be useful in order to record what developments had taken place since my initial visits. Consequently, I contacted each organization in the Spring of 1989 by post and/or telephone. The updates that I received at that time are dealt with and discussed in the concluding section of each case study.

2.3.3 The research relationship

In a naturalistic inquiry, the relationship between the researcher and the organization being studied is of paramount importance because it sets the scene for the variety, type, quantity and depth of information that can be collected. Unlike a positivist approach, there are no rules to predefine or structure this vital aspect of the research and of necessity it evolves as a function of the researcher and subject personalities, the levels of trust and the ethos of the group. Most naturalists set out to foster collaborative and co-operative relationships with organizational participants, since the overall goal is to do research with, rather than on, people. Whatever the relationship, data collected about this aspect of the research is often an important first clue to the culture. Bogdan and Taylor (1983) make

this point quite succinctly by suggesting that the way a researcher is 'managed' by an organization is a vital aspect of understanding the way reality is put together, and constitutes an important element in data collection.

I began my relationship with all of the groups in this study by explaining my goals and interests. In several instances my initial contact was with individuals who then introduced me to the group. Whatever the form of my entry, I was careful to indicate that my interest was with the overall organization and tried to prevent myself from becoming aligned with particular individuals. With two organizations I formalized my contract by letter, with two others the contract was informal, and with the final group I had my researcher-employee role outlined in my work contract.

In every case I initiated my relationship by informing participants individually or in a group that I was not testing a particular hypothesis and that my main concern was a curiosity about how they got things done. This statement was inevitably accompanied by sighs of relief: participants responded with unanimous pleasure at not being the subject of a test or prediction. I believe that this single fact played a key role in breaking the ice and was an important element in my being accepted with less suspicion than might otherwise have been the case. I explained that my main interest was to find out what it was like to be in a worker-managed organization, and participants indicated that this was something they thought they could help me learn.

I set out to encourage everyone to get involved to the degree that they felt able and willing. Some people felt that they had only the

time to be interviewed and observed, while others welcomed the opportunity to explore more fully the world of co-operative working.

Looking back, I recognize that, although the relationships varied at each site, they had some common features. Initially I was treated rather formally and I found myself initiating most conversations and discussions. At this beginning stage, I usually held a formal, tape-recorded interview with as many individuals as possible. Once people realized that I had no intention of revealing the results of interviews to other participants, I believe that my credibility improved and I found people began to seek me out to talk informally about events and ideas. I was careful to learn the language and assumed the role of naive stranger, making it easier to ask 'silly' questions about those things that everyone else was taking for granted. My initial role in group activities was to be fairly low key and relatively passive, but I gradually took a more active role and found I was often asked for a comment or opinion, which I gave freely and openly.

The more time I spent on site the more informal my relationships became, and I began to notice less and less a distinction between myself and participants. Comments such as, 'you're one of us now, I guess', provided me with benchmarks of the level of trust I had been able to establish. Reinforcing my sense of being accepted and trusted was the high degree to which participants were frank and open with me about those things that they felt were wrong with the organization.

2.3.4 Data analysis

Ethnography can generate an enormous amount of data - interview

transcripts, copious field notes, minutes of meetings, correspondence, anecdotal reports, testimonials, manuals, etc. For me, the analysis and interpretation of these data were an ongoing process. In the first instance I used data as a way of generating questions that emerged while I was in the field and as a source of guidance about what the next round of data collection should emphasize. I used data in a building-block system rather than as something to store-up until the end. In the second instance, I used data as a way of generating analytical questions and conclusions, toward what Glaser and Strauss (1967) have described as the discovery of 'grounded theory'. To these authors, grounded theory is one that will:

> fit the situation being researched, and work when put into use. By fit we mean that the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by work we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behaviour under study (Glaser and Strauss 1967:3).

This is inductive analysis (Skrtic 1985), as distinct from deductive analysis, and Judi Marshall (1987) suggests that it properly involves 'sifting' through the data over and over, each time making some effort to capture key features and tag particular items in a process she terms, 'the soak'. In this way, she suggests, things that are like each other, things that are not like each other, things that conflict and things that show sequence will emerge in a very natural way, often clustering around themes and images. In my experience this process is not quite as easy as Judi recommends, but her image of soaking in the data is one that best describes the process I actually used.

2.3.5 Reporting

In the first chapter of this section, I argued that my position as a naturalist inquirer is to honour the subjectively-experienced and socially-constructed world of organizations, and indicated that I eschew broad generalizations and the delineation of deterministic rules that might govern all social experience. Nonetheless, my experience in this study has also led me to believe that the naturalistic researcher does obtain information supporting at least some degree of interpretive analysis and comparisons that can lead to useful insights about the general topic being considered. While the primary role of the researcher is to provide a descriptive record of the organizational culture, information is also collected that helps to explain and analyse the underlying assumptions and beliefs of the culture.

As a result, this dissertation reports in the following manner:

1) individual case studies of each organization;
2) comparisons of the five organizations;
3) comparisons of the experience of these five groups with information obtained from the literature;
4) an ongoing analysis and description of my own thinking, learning and discoveries relative to worker-managed organization.

2.3.6 Trustworthiness

How do both the researcher and the audience come to an understanding about the trustworthiness of the naturalist inquiry? Unlike the positivist, the naturalist does not have the 'rules' of science to justify his or her findings, and it is at the level of trustworthiness that debates between naturalists and positivists can

become the most acrimonious. Positivists argue that data obtained from naturalistic inquiry is soft and cannot be substantiated by others. Although a science-based positivist may never fully accept a report based on qualitative data, naturalists have reached some agreements on the best way to judge each other's results which emphasize the process of research at least as much as the end product. In this regard, naturalists look for evidence of such things as: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking.

I will return to the issue of trustworthiness at the conclusion of the dissertation; here, I will only briefly discuss some of my techniques. In the section on data collection I mentioned my use of some common techniques used by naturalists, such as triangulation and extensive engagement. Indeed, some of these techniques were inextricably interwoven with my entire approach to the research. In addition, while I was in the field, I wrote several working papers and used these reports in several ways. First, they provided a way for me to give shape to my own learning and understanding of the organization. Second, I used the substance of these reports as the basis of conversations with workgroup members in order to confirm or disconfirm my inchoate impressions and analysis. Although some naturalist theorists recommend formal meetings with organizational members as a way of auditing and authenticating the thinking and findings of the researcher, in my experience this was undesirable. My research relationship with every group was formalized, but my day-to-day working relationship was quite informal. My overall design and pattern of

relationships was more suited to ongoing conversations and discussion than to formalized feed-back of my conclusions. As a result, I used tea breaks, impromptu meetings and casual conversations as opportunities to say what I was thinking and ask for comment. I placed considerable emphasis on establishing collaborative relationships, and to have suddenly become the 'knowing expert' would have been inappropriate.

I used my working papers in a third way: they became the basis of discussions with my academic supervisors, and were aimed at giving them a vicarious experience of the workgroups. By conceptualizing my supervisors as 'strangers' wanting to know more about the workgroups I was studying, I found their questions and need for particular detail invaluable in helping me to shape my own maturing appreciation of the organizations.

2.4 Section Summary

In this section I have outlined the theoretical perspective that I brought into the research and I have discussed extensively the implications that these assumptions have for the methodological approach to the inquiry. In the first chapter I examined the two main trends or traditions in organization research - positivism and naturalism - and indicated my own preference for naturalism and for an interpretive perspective.

In the second chapter, I have introduced the inquiry with reference to the research design, data collection, data analysis, reporting and trustworthiness.

It is now time to turn to the actual organizations themselves. Who

are they? What are they like? What are the organizational members like? How does the work get done? What are the sustaining forces? What are the problems? What is the culture?

SECTION II

FOUR CASE STUDIES

This section profiles four worker-managed organizations. The field work for these case studies was completed between November 1985 and April 1987. In the Spring of 1989 I once again contacted each organization by post and/or telephone to check what developments had taken place since my initial visits. The updates that I received at that time are dealt with and discussed in the concluding section of each case study.

With three groups I spent three months each as a participant-observer, talking to people informally, attending group meetings and observing individual and group activities, and with the fourth group I combined the role of employee and participant observer for a six month period. The four organizations I will profile had been in existence for a period of at least two years, and two of the groups each had 15 years experience by the time of my inquiry. In every case, the workplace was the primary source of income and livelihood for the workers.

The groups I studied varied in size, purpose, product, service, history and location. Three organizations are located in Toronto, Canada, and one is in London, England. The differences in location permit some speculation about whether the characteristics of these organizations transcend the larger political, economic and cultural dissimilarities between Canada and England.

The profiles, then, provide a reference point for the subsequent

sections of my thesis, which are more concerned with comparing and analysing the organizations as a group.

CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION CENTRE (DEC)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter considers The Development Education Centre (DEC), a worker-managed organization located in Toronto, Canada, that produces and distributes educational resources about overseas and domestic social issues. The chapter begins by providing an account of the origins and development of the organization, and then focuses on the people, structures, work routines and worklife experiences that were characteristic of the group in the early 1986 period.

The case study seeks to highlight the dilemmas and conflicts, as well as the successes, that DEC's approach to collective management has produced. In particular, the experience of the workgroup is able to offer an account of the way in which a division of labour into autonomous subunits has resulted in much worker satisfaction and a desirable measure of efficiency, but at the same time has impoverished commitment to and co-operation with the overall collective. This is an organizational dilemma, as the case will illustrate, that participants interpret and respond to in different ways.

My association with DEC began serendipitously at a dinner party in January 1986. The dinner party hostess knew that I was interested in collectives and included a friend of hers named Debbie, who worked at DEC. By the end of the evening I had arranged a visit to the organization the following week. I subsequently negotiated a research

contract that allowed me to interview most workers, attend group meetings, chat informally, read written documentation and generally observe the activities of the workplace over a four month period in early 1986. The ethnographic account contained in this essay, therefore, reflects that time period. An update recounting changes since the time of my inquiry appears at the end of the chapter.

3.2 The Making of the Collective

The Development Education Centre is the only business of its kind in Toronto, possibly in Canada, and would be unusual in any country. In a 1986 publication, DEC indicated that its mission was:

> (to provide) alternative information about the Third World, with emphasis on materials from the Third World itself and news arising from popular struggles. We also work to connect those struggles with Canadian social issues. Women, the unemployed, prairie farmers, immigrants, peace activists, gays and lesbians, and Native Canadians speak out through DEC resources.

In order to do this, DEC organizes public events, rallies and concerts. It also produces, distributes and sells films, books, educational packets, posters, radio programmes, records and tapes on a wide range of subjects related to its mission.

The year 1986 represented a sort of watershed for the organization: it moved to new headquarters and celebrated its fifteenth birthday. The new headquarters, located in a small, older low-rise building on the western edge of downtown Toronto are bright and spacious, and spread over three floors. On the basement level but with its own entrance at street level, is the DEC Bookstore, which is open Monday through Saturday from 11am to 6pm, and has a permanent staff of two people - Marie and Ken. The bookstore has sections on political theory, Africa,

Central and Latin America, the Middle East, women, gays, education, energy, labour, health and safety, and a selection of novels, poetry, audio-cassettes and records. Behind the bookstore is a book distribution unit, also with a staff of two - Todd and Margie. This unit distributes books throughout Canada from a stock of more than a thousand titles from both foreign and domestic publishers.

Also on the basement level, but at the other side of building, is a small research library which houses a collection of materials about international issues. The collection includes pamphlets, articles, books and over one hundred alternative journals, which are generally not available in the public or school library systems. Lawyers, students, teachers and journalists come from all over the city to use the resource, which is made available without charge and open Monday through Friday, noon to 5pm. The library is staffed by three part-time archivists - Alice, Renate and James. The basement level is also the location of an administration office, with a staff of two people - Debbie, who is called 'co-ordinator', and Karen, who is called 'financial co-ordinator'. Debbie and Karen have somewhat controversial roles in the organization as we shall see later in this essay.

The first floor is not used by DEC, but up on the second floor are the film storage/rental offices, and a book publishing unit that is called 'Between the Lines'. DEC Films has six workers, some of whom we shall meet a little later on, who maintain an inventory of over 350 films and videos for sale and rental across Canada. Between the Lines publishes critical writings on subjects ranging from environmental concerns to Third World development, from the politics of health,

education and food production, to the fight for economic justice and sexual liberation. It works in co-operation with an 'alternative' press that actually typesets and prints the materials that are approved and edited by the two workers in the unit - Robert and Marg Anne.

DEC also produces and distributes a radio programme called, 'From a Different Perspective'. The weekly programme, which is put together by three part-time workers, consists of thirty-minute documentaries on social, cultural and economic issues in Canada and the Third World. The programme is broadcast mainly on community and university radio stations across Canada, and in addition, individual programmes are sold on audio-cassette tapes to individuals, schools and libraries. The staff in this unit work out of their homes and are seldom on site.

At the back of the building on the basement level is a very large open-space which is used for meetings and an art gallery. Covering the walls of this open space are posters with themes that provide insight into the political orientation of the organization:

USA OUT OF NICARAGUA -- NOW!

AFRICA IS STARVING, DO YOU CARE?

WOMEN AND TECHNOLOGY: THE ELECTRONIC SWEATSHOP

AS WOMEN SEE IT: WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT.

In tandem with the move to new premises, 1986 marked the fifteenth anniversary of the organization, and sparked a month-long birthday extravaganza which included an anti-apartheid rally, new book launchings, author readings, film screenings, art displays, workshops, a dance with a Reggae band, a week-long open house to show off the new headquarters, and a big party with lots of champagne and cake.

The move and the birthday party symbolized to workers and the public alike that the organization had grown, that it had changed physically, economically and spiritually. In its fifteen year history, DEC had developed from a close-knit group of three friends who lived together communally, to a busy, thriving, multifaceted organization of twenty. While the majority of workers were drinking champagne and sharing a vision of a prosperous future, though, others were wondering whether DEC had become too large and too impersonal, and whether it had taken too sharp a turn in the direction of mainstream organization. In order to understand more fully the character and genesis of these differences of opinion, it is first necessary to reckon with the origins and development of the organization.

DEC was established in 1971 by a small group of people who broke away from OXFAM Canada because they felt that it was not doing enough to educate and politicize the Canadian public about Third World issues abroad and inequality at home. Johnathan, who now works in DEC Films and is the only founding member of the group still on staff in 1986, recalls that they all believed OXFAM had become 'smugly middle-class'. He suggests that DEC was begun, first, to create an alternative education and resource centre with more political punch, and second, as an organization that would reject the principles of bureaucracy and be managed as a workers' collective without a formal hierarchy or rules. Johnathan indicates that they saw themselves in opposition not only to the work of OXFAM, but also to its organizational structure - a structure that they say as highly bureaucratic, impersonal and lacking in creativity. During an interview, he summarized elements of the early

ethos by saying:

> We had equal salaries, equal jobs, equal responsibility and equal commitment. We saw ourselves as combining our work with the rest of our lives. We had a vision of a society that might come to operate on the same principles.

In Johnathan's view, the original purpose of the organization, and the meaning of working collectively and co-operatively, were linked to assumptions about the nature of being oppositional, countercultural and alternative. Commune, counterculture and worker collective, in this view, were interrelated, and the organization was intended to reduce the separation between work, leisure and living. From Johnathan's perspective, during the early days of DEC, work, leisure and political action seemed one and the same, and an important component of the formative beliefs and values was to not only change the system, but to 'beat' the system as well. Finding lots of time to explore and give direction to progressive social causes in and around Toronto marked the group's early activities and ethos as much as the production of educational materials.

Government grants fed many of the initial production projects and paid for the group's living expenses. Not long into its history, DEC was set up as a registered non-profit charity - a prerequisite for many of the grants it obtained. This move created a ten person Board, which continues to be the official governing body of the organization. The Board of Directors, who meet several times a year to monitor the activities of DEC, is supposed to approve the financial statements and provide advice on specific DEC projects. Although a few Board members spearhead projects and voluntarily contribute to the labour force of the organization, by and large, the Board does not steer the organization,

playing instead a quiet but supportive role.

Over time, the organization grew in size, prospered economically and gradually lost many of its commune-like features. Funding for the kind of projects that DEC valued seemed plentiful in the early 1970's. New workers were added through friendship and social networks, and although they were closely tied to the prevailing value system, they did not become part of the communal living arrangements. Not long into the history of DEC, it seems, the separation between work, leisure and living became more distinct, although not entirely separate. Work came to be organized around the various project grants - projects such as creating a library resource centre, producing a film, writing a book or manual, and scripting a radio programme. Workers carved-out their activities around these projects, and when one project was concluded they usually began another in the same general area. Some of the grant money was not ear-marked for a specific project, and these funds gave the group additional freedom to design work and activities around their own interests and talents. Gradually, the key areas of activity - particularly films, publishing, book distribution - came to be so stable that they were thought of as regular features of the organization.

Johnathan recalls group management in the post-commune days as being very informal and flexible. A weekly get-together provided the only formal decision-making vehicle, supplemented by frequent ad hoc meetings and social events. Other workers who are still on staff from the early period warmly recall pot-luck suppers and week-end parties. As a result, social interactions - both on and off the job - appear to have been the loci of decision-making and policy development, rather

than formal meetings.

House-keeping and overall administrative functions - things like sweeping the floor, locking-up, bookkeeping, budgeting, grant administration, press releases, public relations, fundraising, and bill paying - were allocated initially by rotation. Many of these jobs, however, proved to be unpopular and unappealing as they had little direct link with the oppositional and countercultural ethos of the organization, and the job rotation approach proved to be problematic. As the organization grew, the number of administrative tasks escalated and became more and more complex, increasing the time workers had to allocate to these tasks. In an attempt to resolve these problems, several co-ordination committees were established to deal with such matters as finance, fund-raising and publicity, and an administrative position was created to deal with day-to-day office duties. As we shall see later in this essay, the duties for the person in this position were never very clear, and a consensus about the role and authority of the job proved to require ongoing and continuous negotiation.

Over time, the pool of DEC-produced resources grew. The organization was also able to acquire the Canadian rights to distribute 'alternative' books and films from both independent and commercial sources. Although the original product list emphasized Third World issues, each year saw the inventory include more and more materials to do with socio-economic problems relevant to developed countries, particularly Canada. Products began to reflect the special interests of women, visible minorities, immigrants and gay people, and many of these latter products proved to be the most commercially successful. Over the

years, DEC was able to establish a loyal group of customers for its products. Customers came to include schools, hospitals, community groups, churches, students, foreign governments and the general public. In much of this specialized market there was virtually no competition.

Gradually, DEC reduced its dependency on government grants, partly because these sources of funding began to disappear, but also because of the increasing revenues from its sales and rentals. Whereas its funding had been 100% from grants in the early 1970's, by 1986, only 20% of its $600,000 in revenues came from grants.

In a way, the organization grew in spite of itself and without enormous effort, in response to an uncompetitive marketplace, a clientele that became relatively stable once established, and a canny ability to obtain grants. With increased numbers of staff and an increasingly complex business operation, however, there were also structural and cultural changes in the organization. The various product and service centres became more and more stabilized, and by the late 1970's were being referred to as 'mini-collectives'. This term was indicative of the fact that each of the main product and service areas had become fairly autonomous, and were assuming more and more responsibility for the running of their day-to-day affairs and activities. By the early 1980's, the work was divided into nine distinct mini-collectives, giving rise to the configuration of offices and organizational arrangements that I described in the introduction to the essay. More from a response to the work of the organization and the talents of workers than through planned change, then, DEC came to have a highly departmentalized approach. The development of autonomous mini-

collectives, however, proved to be a double-edged sword. One the one hand, as we shall see, the division of labour into autonomous subunits resulted in much worker satisfaction and a desirable measure of efficiency, but on the other hand, has contributed to a situation in which commitment to and co-operation with the overall collective had sometimes floundered. With these thoughts in mind, let us now look inside the organization, circa 1988.

3.3 Collective workers and routines

In April 1986 there were fifteen full-time and five part-time workers, all receiving the same benefits and earning the same wage (based on a full-time salary of $16,000.). Until recent times turnover had been low, and when a vacancy occurred it was traditionally filled through a friendship network rather than public recruitment. Because of this, there was never much explicit attention paid to orientation to the organization of new workers. In the past five years, however, turnover has increased and effort has been directed toward less familial selection methods. In fact, DEC recently instituted an affirmative action policy directed at racial minorities. As a result, for the first time in its history, there is now a black woman and an Asian man on staff. Nevertheless, DEC continues to be an organization that is predominately white people from middle class backgrounds who have entered the work group as a friend of someone on staff and largely as a known entity, even though changes are evident with each new round of hiring.

Staff come to DEC with a variety of previous work experiences, such

as teaching, film making, and clerical occupations. Most workers are well educated and range in age from the mid-twenties to mid-forties. Whatever the recent changes, however, workers appear to share a rejection of middle class values, and words such as 'materialism', 'careerism' and 'capitalism' get tossed around with disdain and suspicion. Rejection of these concepts is usually accompanied by an general orientation toward progressive social change. For most workers, a political identification with the 'left' overrides any other reason for working at DEC. In the words of several workers:

> The main reason I'm here is for my political beliefs and social change agenda. I would still work for DEC if it was not a collective although I think that being a collective is part of our political statement. To me, the collective structure, and everything else, is secondary to what we are trying to do politically.
>
> The most attractive thing about it is that it is on the left and where being nonwhite is not a hurdle.
>
> I guess I'm here for a lot of reasons - but I especially agree with the basic ideology of the place. It allows me to feel like I can integrate my personal and political beliefs.

Workers have in common many beliefs about the nature of the world and share a generalized perspective about how to best operate in that world - all of these echoing themes which were prevalent during the founding of DEC years before. Staff at DEC subscribe to the belief that the world is an unfair and unjust place, and that some particular groups of people get the short end of the stick. As a way of explaining this inequality and injustice, most workers endorse a socialist interpretation, in which a capitalistic world economy is believed to be at the heart of the problem. Workers argue within particular strains of socialism, and have somewhat different perspectives to do with strategy

and solutions, but all share the overriding basic assumption that the world and its social-economic institutions favour some groups of people over others and that this is wrong. These general assumptions and beliefs provide a very strong social glue and without them the organization would probably not survive.

The shared sense of political outlook is a major social integrator: it is usually voiced proudly and has engendered much camaraderie and feelings of specialness. Members of DEC think of themselves as near the nucleus of the 'Toronto-left' and on the forefront of social change issues. If there is a pro-abortion rally, an anti-apartheid demonstration, a peace march, a gay rights march, a women's day celebration or similar event, workers from DEC are usually present. Much of the intrinsic reward system at DEC, as a result, is linked to the opportunity the organization provides for status and recognition in the outside political community.

In addition, there is some agreement about how DEC should manage itself, also evocative of themes which dominated the founding ethos. Everyone holds a general belief that the pattern of working, the wages, and the level of personal autonomy should be equal and that the organization should not merely mirror the kind of business institutions it seeks to criticize and reject. Central as political affiliation is for everyone on staff, then, workers also like working at DEC for other, more practical, reasons. Most people like the sense of freedom and flexibility it offers, and the absence of managers or supervisors. A member of the book distributing unit, for example, says:

> The collective aspect of it is one of the things that make it worthwhile. Of necessity we have to operate in the commercial

> world, and that's enough constraint for anyone. If you added a bunch of managers breathing down your neck it would be just awful. If I feel sick and don't want to come in, I don't worry about it, I come in another time.

In summary, the staff at DEC are united by a particular political commitment, vocabulary and ideology, with the added dimension that these beliefs are expected to be translated into action. Within this general framework of being actively on the left, however, there is considerable freedom for individual workers to direct their energies toward causes and movements that they find most appealing, be it gay rights, the women's movement, South Africa, or local elections. As might be expected, a large amount of influence is accorded to individual workers who embody the values of high political commitment and community activism.

Although there is a political 'persona' that is a critical dimension to individual acceptance at DEC, there is no one personality type that has become normalized or even sought after. Individuals range from easy going and soft-spoken, to out-spoken, aggressive, highly active risk-taking. Some of these differences become most obvious when comparing long term and new workers. In general, old-timers tend to like the founding ethos - laid-back and family-like - and new comers tend to place a higher value on personal achievement and organizational growth. These differences in work and personal styles are most noticeable in the different number of hours worked by workers. Not everyone works their contracted number of hours: some are on site more, and others interpret required work-hours rather loosely. Another contrast in work styles that is noticeable has to do with speed. Some workers appear to be in a constant state of almost frenetic activity

while others project a much more casual image. Obviously, it is difficult to pass judgement about the degree to which these are personality traits, or patterns reflective of the amount of work to be done, but the two types of behaviour are both evident and accepted.

The overall ambience at DEC is difficult to pin down - it varies considerably with the particular configuration of personnel, the time of day and the day of the week. In general, it is a work location where individuals experience a large amount of freedom to behave in different ways. As might be expected, however, there is what one worker called, 'the outer limit'. This ill-defined limit is one beyond which behaviour may leave the larger group disappointed, let down or angry. Workers dislike this sort of tension, but view it as an unavoidable outcome of the more important goal of allowing what one person called 'the freedom to be real at work'. No one has ever been formally rejected from the group, although people are reported to have 'voluntarily' left the organization.

In order to get an insider's view of the individuals that find their way to DEC, and of the way they interpret their experience and shape their social reality, let me introduce a few - Richard, Johnathan, Karen, Debbie, Todd and Margie. Richard and Karen are fairly new to the organization, and the others have been with DEC for longer periods of time.

Richard, an Asian man, is in his late twenties and from a prosperous middle-class background. He describes himself as a gay activist with an intense dedication to the 'alternative' film industry. Richard helped to prepare and write the 1986 film catalogue, and its

introduction provides clues to how he views and interprets the role of DEC Films:

> Hollywood and TV networks offer one view of the world; DEC Films offers another. We stock over 350 films and videos - including features and shorts, documentaries, drama, and experimental work. DEC Films have won many awards for their artistic and political merit. We have a flexible pricing system that allows many groups, including those with few resources, to use the films.

Richard is one of six people in the film department. Much of the work is routine, involving booking, distribution and billing, and workers have had to create fairly rigid schedules as most work occurs during regular business hours. As a result, staff in the film unit have a less flexible approach to work hours than in some of the other subunits with less public contact. The film unit is a busy location - the phone rings constantly, couriers come and go with films, the volume of mail is high, films must be rewound, repaired and checked before and after rentals. Richard thinks that the work could be much more organized and laments the absence of a computer. Everything must be done by hand, including the entering into a large filing card of such things as film rentals and returns, updates of customer's billing address, accounts receivable and payable. Richard assures me that his number one priority for the work unit is a computerized system.

Richard sees film as a powerful education tool and is involved in film-making as well as film distribution. Although he has been involved with DEC for a number of years as a contract employee on special projects, he has only been on the permanent staff for six months, working four days a week. He is highly articulate, has thought a great deal about DEC and has the interesting perspective of a 'newcomer'. He says that he is impressed with the way the organization has confronted

its own racism in the last couple of years, noting that in the past the staff had been pretty much white and 'straight' (non-gay).

Richard recognizes, however, that with new people from different backgrounds, finding a common culture is problematic. Recalling his own socialization to the organization, he remarks:

> Coming here you have to learn the political vocabulary, but also struggle with trying to teach the old timers your vocabulary and political perspective. A lot of people don't seem to have the ability to crossover, and this creates isolation and tension. For example, people at DEC had a history of being very committed and the organization was their prime political responsibility. What you had was a group of people who were underpaid and overworked. So when new people come along they are expected to take on these values, but for some of us it seems wierd. When you bring in people with political interests in racism, you can't expect them to accept substandard working conditions - that's what they have been fighting all their lives.

He notes that oldtimers continue to honour 'cultural references' in such areas as food, clothing and language, and that can make it hard to fit in if you are coming from a different perspective. On the one hand, he says, 'these cultural references can help you deal with your isolation from the broader society', but on the other hand, they 'prevent the organization from expanding on the inside'.

Richard feels that DEC has changed a lot from the time when he first arrived on a contract. On a philosophical note, he summarizes his perspective in this way:

> DEC has gone through a quantitative change that has become qualitative, and people are still kind of looking around in the dark. People are struggling with what has changed and wondering how to deal with it. Some people are talking about experts to look at our operations and others are saying - 'wait - we shouldn't be getting this big, let's not even have this situation.' Others are saying it will go away; that it will solve itself. Probably each person on the collective has a different way of dealing with the changes. Before, when we were all in the church, everything and everybody was on the same floor and people were at least physically close - you could shout. Now we are on several floors

> and this is beginning to affect people. I go down a floor for meetings and to use the photocopier, but other people would never come up here - there is no reason to come up here. We are all becoming isolated.

Richard dwells on these ideas and they are obviously important to him. He says, 'I don't think DEC knows what it is anymore' and talks about the problems to do with decision-making to illustrate his point. In his view, more and more decisions are taken at the level of the subunits, and workers recognize only after the fact that policy-level decisions have been made without any discussion by the whole group. One example he talks about is the film collection. He recalls that in the past, decisions about what films to purchase for subsequent rental were considered collective decisions and that these debates often provided a forum for sharing ideas and views. Now, he says, 'those discussions all take place in our unit'.

Richard is also interested in and concerned with power and norms, and in his view some groups and some people have much more influence than others.

> It is bigger now and we don't have that cohesion anymore - there was a sense of oneness that is now being eroded. You hear people complaining that it is not as warm as it used to be and there are now tensions between the different areas. The larger subgroups can be quite a force, even a coalition. For example, we [meaning the film unit and a few others] are pushing for the idea of an auditorium and it must be hard for smaller units to object. We are six 'against' units that have only one or two people. We have a lot of influence through our numbers of people and the amount of money we bring in - others are bound to resent that. They can easily see 'us' as getting to define what DEC is becoming.
>
> Even though people are supposedly equal, people who have worked longer are often more articulate and take on positions of power. What happens is that it (power) is obvious to new people but not to older members because people who have been here just continue doing things the way they always have and they don't see - or don't want to see -what it's like for new people. It's said to be a collective, and loose, but in fact there is an informal way of doing things that is very strict and this does create a hierarchy.

> If you are not in this hierarchy, your influence is lessened. Some people never make the grade and this has produced some martyrs. My feeling is that there is a culture here that is not quite right.

Richard believes that collective working has to be informed by a progressive politics or religion. He says that a collective must be informed by a kind of understanding that involves fairness, sharing, trust and co-operation, and that these qualities have to come from a shared set of beliefs. He notes that religion and certain political movements can have the proper mix of beliefs and assumptions and he wonders if DEC really does have the necessary ingredients. He feels that DEC has to rediscover itself and relocate its common beliefs and values. In practical terms, he thinks it has probably moved beyond the sort of collective it was in the beginning and now needs more formal structures to bring people together and help to give shape to a common set of beliefs. He believes that there is great symbolic power in the central administrative office and feels that this should be a rallying point for everyone in the organization. Johnathan, the longest-standing member of DEC, also works in the film unit. Johnathan is the only person on staff with 'hands on' knowledge of the entire history of the organization and people defer to his knowledge on matters pertaining to the past, but are less influenced by his vision for the future. Some workers refer to him as 'the lifer', with an innuendo that he may have been around for too long.

Johnathan sits at a desk outside the main film holding area and concentrates much of his work energy on the accounts receivable and accounts payable. He is a big man with what might be called an avuncular image, although it is difficult to get him to talk. He

usually tries to resort to yes or no answers, or with phrases such as, 'I really don't know about that.' What he does say, however, is often very powerful and filled with passionate expression. He obviously cares a great deal about DEC.

To Johnathan, DEC has always had difficulty deciding if it is a business or an educational force, and he senses that much of the debate over the years has failed to resolve this fundamental tension. Although he has obtained his economic livelihood from DEC for fifteen years, he looks back and wonders:

> Maybe we should have set ourselves up as a volunteer organization - maybe we were naive to think that we could combine our political goals with our work. We always thought that growth was a good thing, but every little bit of growth - every grant - meant that we had to adopt more of a business perspective - you know, getting more money, shaping our goals into a bureaucratic language, operating in more traditional ways.

He recalls the days when everyone would drop what they were doing and spend the afternoon talking politics and strategy, contrasting that with his current view of some workers as 'preoccupied with where the next pay cheque is coming from'.

Johnathan says that he now finds DEC frustrating because there are so many people and because the organization is 'fragmented into subgroups' [ironically, given he was an architect of these changes]. To him, these developments have created 'poor circumstances for a good collective'. He dismisses my question about what might improve the situation by saying: 'we now have twenty managers! The problem is more on being managed than managing.' He thinks that some people are caught up in their own need to be powerful and are out of touch with the egalitarian spirit of the organization. He cites the example of people

complaining about the long discussions at collective meetings as exemplifying to him that fact that some workers are unwilling or unable to work in a collective style.

Johnathan is a bit of loner in the organization. He takes his coffee on his own, part of a ritual of slipping outside for a cigarette (a habit, he says, which separates him from the 'newer generation of activists'). He seems an anachronism: his vision of a changed world - a kinder, more caring world, with less inequality and injustice - is widely shared by others in the organization, but his roots in the more iconoclastic world of the 1960's, with its emphasis on being alternative in every sense of the word, is at odds with that larger part of DEC which sees itself as a business with a need to borrow at least some of the ways of more established model for small business organization. At any rate, let's leave Johnathan on his own for now and move on to a worker who may be the archetype of a newer generation of workers at DEC.

Karen is new to the organization. Like Richard, she is in her early twenties and has had the advantages of a middle-class background. She is well educated, articulate and self-confident. She has an MBA in accounting and was hired to organize a financial system for the organization - a job she sees as necessary to bring DEC out of 'the dark ages of hippydom'. Although new to the group, Karen has already acquired quite a reputation, and is often referred to as 'the MBA'. In conversations with other workers, Karen is frequently used as a 'symbol' for the way in which the organization is moving more and more toward traditional business practices, typified by the high pitched remark of one worker - 'can you believe it - DEC now has an MBA !'

Karen started her job by visiting each of the subunits to discover how they organized their financial matters, and found nearly every area was breaking many of the rules she had learned in her MBA courses. She told me that she was determined to bring the organization into the modern age of accounting, and that a large part of her role would be educational. Her zest for her job has endeared her to some and alienated her from others.

A bright, young, female MBA in Toronto would have many choices in jobs, some of them paying very high wages. Why would such a person choose DEC? Karen says that one of the principal reasons is that she does not have to discard her political persona while at work (something she thinks she might have to do in a more traditional workplace for an MBA). She describes herself as 'a very political feminist' and wonders how that would go over in an accounting firm. She also feels she gains a sort of political affiliation by working at DEC. On a less philosophical note, she likes the opportunity to wear jeans to work and more or less set her own hours.

Karen expresses surprise at the amount of conflict she has observed in the organization. She ascribes much of this to 'strong personalities', but also posits that a lack of co-operation and a lack of a common vision is at fault. During her interviews and meetings with staff, she says she noticed a certain 'selfishness' in people. One of the things that she thinks she has uncovered is a fear people have of making financial data more public. She notes that some people seem to fear a central accounting system, and she suspects people fear loosing control over the money they bring in. She summarizes what she thinks

she has found by suggesting that some workers and subgroups seem to lack a 'generosity of spirit'.

Karen's desk is in the lower basement level, right beside Debbie's, and the two of them obviously like each other. They share a similar vision of DEC as a more business-like organization and think that what DEC does is probably more important than how it does it. In a certain academic jargon, they might both be described as 'task people' as opposed to 'process people'. Together, they have formed a little subunit of their own, even though this is not formally acknowledged by the organization.

Debbie has been with DEC for over six years, having given up a very good teaching job to join an organization where she felt she could put many of her political beliefs into practice. Debbie's political roots include a splash of Marxist-Leninist and Trotskist ideology, but she says she tempers those ideas with 'a more realistic view of what is possible'. Not for her the central state - she wants socialism on a human scale - and that means decentralized power and includes organizations run, like DEC, as workers' collectives.

If there is a stereotype of the staunch, Marxist ideologue-on-the-left as a cold, without humour, bureaucratic-loving conformist, Debbie is about as far from it as you can get. She is a small, attractive women, with sparkling eyes and winning smile. She also has a beautiful little baby that occasionally gets brought to work. Debbie does not sit still for long - she is a whirlwind of energy and ideas, and prone to outbursts of anger if things are not going her way.

Debbie's job is arguably the most controversial and difficult in

the organization. For the past two years she has been called 'the co-ordinator', a title that has different meanings to different people. Some view it with suspicion, as one step too many towards a manager. Others see it in less controversial terms, crediting Debbie with doing all the work that no one else wants, and as one of her co-workers put it, 'holding the whole thing together'. To Debbie it means:

> a combination of shit-disturber, payroll clerk, bank manager, mother-confessor, secretary, public relations officer, report preparer, fundraiser, project co-ordinator, landlord liaisee, business and corporate face of DEC.

As I have already pointed out, the job of co-ordinator was created to deal with the escalating number of administrative jobs and the gradual letting go of administrative tasks by individuals and groups. Debbie says that the role was originally conceived as 'purely administrative', and seen as being 'completely about non-leadership', but suggests that 'the reality was that DEC really needed something more'. In her view, this 'something more' did involve leadership and vision, included co-ordination between the subunits and acting as a mediator when conflict occurred. In her words:

> I'm suppose to please everybody. I'm suppose to know what everyone is doing, act as a co-ordinator and mediator, and at the same time not get on anyone's back. Currently, I spend up to a day a week on intra-collective politics.

The role is more than just mediator and administrator, though. In an outline of her job that she presented to the collective while I was on-site, Debbie wrote:

> I spend a lot of time worrying and thinking about DEC. This relates to a part of the job which is difficult to pinpoint. The world outside of DEC assumes that because I am called a co-ordinator that I play a certain managerial role. I always correct that assumption and explain that the collective as a whole is the manager. But it is undeniable that because of my location

> in the administrative part of DEC, with contact with all the subgroups, and in all the committees, I do at this time play what I would call a 'leadership' rather than 'managerial' role. This sometimes results in conflict with collective members who think I take on too much, both for my own good, but also because I then may have too much power.

In a hushed tone, Debbie told me:

> I have a conception of leadership myself which is different from some other people. I think that I should often act on behalf of DEC - going to the collective for everything is not only time-consuming but it is often stupid. I really do have the best interests of the group in mind when I make decisions. People on the outside expect me to say yes or no to things rather than tell them I will have to take it up at the collective and get back to them in a month or two. I acknowledge a fine line here, but I maybe have a different sense of where the line should be drawn.

The collective [meaning all collectives], she argues, is 'a perfectly conceived structure for perfect people'. She does not hesitate to voice her opinion that not everyone at DEC is perfect and that therefore, neither is the structure. Whatever she feels are the faults of the structure and of her job, however, there is no doubt that Debbie is passionately committed to DEC and says that she is willing 'to take all kinds of shit to see this organization succeed'.

Debbie's robust, take-control manner has sometimes created tension between her and the rest of the collective. The line between her sphere of authority and what needs to go before the collective is often fuzzy, and for some members of the organization, Debbie has occasionally erred on the side of autonomous decision-making. Later in this essay, I will return to Debbie and some of the difficulties she has encountered with decision-making that can be slow and frustrating.

Todd and Margie work in the book distribution unit on the basement level of the building. They seem very much a team and obviously like working together. When I approached them for interviews, they suggested

that they be interviewed together because, as they pointed out, 'we have nothing to hide from each other'. Todd and Margie have been with DEC for over five years. They are in their thirties, bright, and articulate, and give off an air of enthusiasm for their work in the unit.

They suggest that if they were doing the same work at a traditional publishing house - taking orders, packing books, invoicing customers, sending out catalogues, etc. - they would probably be bored to death. For them, however, being at DEC means they can be proud of their routine and repetitive tasks. Many of the books they stock and distribute are picked for their political assertions and they like being able to be part of this educational process. Todd particularly likes the freedom and flexibility that a worker-managed organization provides. He says:

> Here, we don't have to worry about stuff - if I've got a stomach ache or don't want to come in, I don't worry about it, I just come in later or work longer another time. If you had a bunch of bosses breathing down your neck it would be just awful. Margie and I can work out our own schedules and routines.

Margie agrees with Todd, although she believes that the work environment has its stress.

> It is only ideally that it sounds ideal. Maybe you wouldn't have that stomach ache if you didn't work in such a stressful environment. The overall attitude I'm coming from is that I wouldn't consider going back to a straight job - I couldn't not have this control over my working environment -although this way of working is often more stressful. Here, when there is an issue, you can mount a struggle and try to change things, but that can be more stressful than just opting out as you might do in a hierarchical workplace.

Margie and Todd see DEC as essentially a 'group of subgroups'. In their view, the high degree of departmentalization at DEC, while providing for a significant amount of job satisfaction, has led to

competition and conflict. Commenting on some of the outcomes of departmentalization, they remark:

> Margie: [it] affects a sense of common purpose because sometimes we are at cross purposes - as a simple example, we sell books to the bookstore and sometimes they can't pay us. This can put us in a difficult situation and ends up causing strained relationships.
>
> Todd: We are doing better financially than some other areas and because of that we are not questioned very much about what we do. We would only want to take things to the collective such as space needs and even then we'd go with a proposal. We'd be afraid to initiate a discussion that might put restrictions on us.
>
> Margie: Here, people often feel segregated from each other; the things that matter deeply to us about our work, are virtually unknown to other units and vice versa. Sometimes I feel DEC as a whole is almost vestigial and just a place where people come together and have meetings.

Paradoxically perhaps, they like and see themselves prospering from the departmentalized approach, but also see it risking the sense of unity, co-operation and common purpose. They consider some of the reasons for this lack of common purpose as also having to do with changes over time in the mix of people and the culture that different people favour. Speaking together, they suggest:

> We're not all that homogeneous anymore. At one point, DEC was all very similar kinds of people with similar backgrounds - the founders lived together - even when I started in '81 a lot of people still lived together in one house and the whole organization was about ten people. I guess you could say it used to be a family where you made your living. That caused and still causes some problems because some of those people saw themselves as a collective and not a business. There is a history of tension between acting like a collective and being very sociable and acting like a business. In my opinion, there still needs to be some family component, but what this looks like depends on how things evolve. I'm a big non-believer in whipping-up false enthusiasm or false or phoney emotion - I want the freedom to go off by myself and essentially be judged on what I do and not whether I've got a smile; others rate the success of DEC more on social terms. You have to like people more than you might in a traditional organization - and if that breaks down you have a real problem - but I don't want to live with these people.

Although I have not profiled all the workers at DEC, meeting the ones that I have introduced provides a sense of the diversity of personalities, work orientations and concerns that are characteristic of the workgroup. As workers themselves acknowledge, the diversity of personality types and work orientations, along with the value attached to individual freedom, and the absence of formal rule-based codes for behaviour, has inherent within it the potential for a pulling of wills and conflict. Disabling conflict, however, is avoided in large part by the way the work is organized. As I have already made evident, work at DEC is highly decentralized into subunits, and it is at these locations where final hiring decisions are made, where the bulk of interpersonal communication occurs, where there is a more pronounced degree of personality and cultural homogeneity and where there is more noticeable pressure to conform.

The work of each subunit or mini-collective varies according to the nature of the task, and the tempo and routines also vary in response to individual personalities and group ethos. For example, some units such as DEC Films and the bookstore, must keep regular hours in order to meet the demands of their customers, and in these cases work schedules allow for less flexibility and change must be negotiated with co-workers. The book publishing unit, on the other hand, requires much less adaptation to customers and the two workers here can alter their schedules and routines as they see fit.

Overriding the subunit autonomy, there are two organization-wide agreements about how work should be arranged, one discouraging rigid subdivisions of work, the other to avoid formal supervisory structures.

There are no subunit co-ordinators or chairpersons. In fact, though, staff members within the larger units, such as DEC Films, do appear to have favoured projects and tasks, and some work specialization has occurred. Additionally, influence is not completely level at the subunit level. Newer workers, such as Richard, observe longer term members as having more influence, and those workers who are more articulate or assertive probably acquire a thicker layer of control over subunit activities. The patterns of influence at the subunit level, however, are almost never cited as problematic. In all of my conversations with staff, the central point of debate always had to do intergroup conflict and with the role and purpose of the overall collective, rather than with intradepartmental issues.

3.4 Conflict and Integration

DEC's decentralized approach to work organization appears to provide a desirable measure of efficiency, is the source of much worker satisfaction and motivation, and effects a fairly high level of co-operation at the subunit level. It has also created competition and conflict between the units, most recognizable in matters to do with money and status. Some units, such as book and film distribution, bring in considerable revenue which then go into the general accounts, while others, such as the library and the bookstore, are not self-sufficient and drain the general budget. Members of the prosperous units believe they should be able to influence the fate of money they generate, and have succeeded in wielding some such influence, leaving some members of the financially-dependent units feeling devalued and without power. In

a couple of cases, communication between the competing units has deteriorated, and the source of interpersonal conflict can often be traced to these divisional antagonisms.

The workers collective meeting is the primary forum for resolving such conflict and unifying the organization. These meetings use both formal and informal methods to come to terms with individual and mini-collective differences. These meetings convene fortnightly and include all workers. One meeting a month is a formal gathering during work hours, and the second meeting is held in the evening and usually combined with a social activity such as a pot-luck dinner. Collective meetings discuss and approve all matters to do with personnel policy, finances, future planning, and matters to do with overall organization. These meetings usually take a couple of hours and may be rather formal or informal, depending, in part, on whether it is the day or evening slot and on whose turn it is to chair, a function that rotates through the group. The most controversial issues raised at these meetings underscore what I see as a basic and unresolved question: what is (and what should be) the role of the collective as a whole within a departmentalized and complex organization of twenty people? Because of the high premium placed on subunit autonomy, workers increasingly wonder what the role and purpose of the managing collective should be.

Nonetheless, the overall collective is where major decisions involving such things as control of cash flow, large expenditures, hiring and selection criteria, changes in subunit activities, and the like, are supposed to be debated and resolved.

In theory, the boundaries between the various spheres of decision-

making are fairly straightforward. In practice, however, the boundaries are often grey and easily overlooked or ignored, signifying major disagreements about how DEC is and should be organized. A number of important decisions with far reaching implications for the collective have been made at the level of individuals, subunits or other coalitions, and have resulted in considerable conflict and ill will. Exploring a couple of examples of decisions that have been taken outside of the formally laid-out channels is highly instructive, because it illuminates the way in which different individuals can operate within a very different sense of the social order.

As a first example, I will deal with Ken, who works in the bookstore. Ken is a taciturn man who gives off an air of being preoccupied and unapproachable. He does not like being interviewed, and he rescheduled three appointments before I finally got to talk to him. Even at that, he required us to stand and chat at the cash check-out. He describes himself as a working-class socialist, committed to progressive causes, and he usually sports a lapel-button to do with some political movement. On the day of our chat he was wearing two buttons: one for pro-choice and one calling for the freedom of Nelson Mandela. He has longish but stylish hair, and is quite handsome in a rugged masculine way. He is an odd person to find in a bookstore because he seems to lack the friendly, assertive manner that one imagines would be best suited to selling and promoting books. It is hard to catch his eye in conversation and it is often necessary for customers to actively seek out his help. One of his passions is music, and when he is on the job, the bookstore is usually filled with sound - sometimes a soft rock band

or a symphony, but more often a protest tune from the 1960's.

Ken says that he believes one of the best ways to educate and politicize people is through music, and he was the first person at DEC to think of concerts and other cultural events as a natural extension of the organization's mission. How this idea progressed from Ken's dream to a regular part of DEC's activities is an interesting example of the ways in which policy decisions can get made outside the formal decision-making channels.

At the beginning, Ken merely 'talked it up to people'. In his recollection, everyone he spoke to thought that it was a good idea, so he decided to go ahead and approach a couple of bands and booking agents. He scouted out a number of venues and found one that he thought was the right size and rental rate. Before long he had tentatively booked a couple of groups for a first concert. He then took his proposal to a collective meeting. At the meeting, a number of people expressed surprise, since it was the first time they had even heard about the idea, while others were more supportive. In recalling the meeting and subsequent events, workers have quite different opinions and perspectives about how DEC came to be the business of organizing musical events shortly thereafter. In the opinion of some, Ken got to be the person doing 'exciting work' that was considered 'not really part of the bookstore's work'.

After the meeting in which the idea had been discussed, Ken believed that he had a go-ahead to arrange a first concert, including permission to spend money. For others, however, the issue was interpreted as unresolved, and they left the meeting thinking that the

proposal would be debated more fully, both informally in chance encounters and at subsequent meetings. It was quite surprising to some members of the organization, then, when a flyer appeared announcing that a DEC-sponsored concert was to take place the following month. One worker recalled:

> The first I knew about the concert was when a friend - someone not at DEC - told me she had seen a poster and wondered if I could get her tickets. I was really embarrassed and angry. I actually thought that concerts were a good idea and in keeping with the sort of things that DEC should do, but it seemed to me it needed a full debate. After all, it was a policy decision and involved spending money and was a very public statement about the sort of things we do.

Other workers found out in less embarrassing circumstances, but nonetheless recalled feeling angry and disappointed. Ken was seen as having broken a trust and an agreement about how decisions should be made.

At the next collective meeting, the mood was tense and even hostile. Workers described themselves as feeling a conflict between their support (many liked the idea and thought it within the mandate of DEC), and their dissatisfaction with the way the decision had been made. However, by that point, it was also interpreted as a 'fait accompli' and as one worker remarked:

> By that time, we were, in a sense, going through the motions - after all, forcing the cancellation of the concert would probably have put the organization in a bad light with the public, but there was a lot of anger associated with the decision - anger that I think was never fully expressed - but a lot of us, I think, secretly hoped the concert would be a bust. I thought the debate needed to include discussion about other possible directions for expansion and that the decision to spend money in this way needed to be played against other financial problems in the organization. In particular, the fact that the bookstore was not making very much money and had some staffing problems made me think that Ken's time might have been better spent in the bookstore. No one really confronted him, but I think a lot of us felt demoralized over what

had happened, and it lent a lot of support to the idea that lots of important decisions were occurring outside the collective meetings.

Another worker also indicated liking the idea of concerts, but expressed concern about the decision itself and how the decision had come about. This worker also wondered how appropriate it was for concerts to be within the mandate of the bookstore. He felt that the bookstore needed all the energy its staff could muster in order to make it a viable enterprise, and felt that the bookstore staff had little time to devote to organizing concerts. In his view, something was bound to suffer and he thought that it would be the bookstore. In addition, he expressed some bitterness over the fact that the idea of concerts was not debated more generally and, if it was to be something DEC started doing, the job should have been up for grabs by anyone interested. In conversation, he revealed that he would have liked to organize musical and cultural events and somehow he felt deprived of the opportunity to even express his interest. As it turned out, the concert was a social and financial success and paved the way for further similar events. But it is a sore point with some people and usually gets described as something that Ken (and the bookstore) does, rather than something that 'we' do.

What the example helps to illustrate is that strong individuals, if they really want to, can circumvent the formal decision-making channels (that is, the collective meeting) and by-pass the established negotiating and consensus processes. The example also sheds some light on the way that bitter and angry feelings can develop when the formal decision-making network is by-passed, leading to a perception that the collective process is no longer functioning. In this way, a level of trust and faith can be damaged, resulting for some in a view that the

collective process can easily be made into a sham. In the face of such experience, it becomes difficult for workers to continue feeling committed to the process of co-operative decision-making. This obviously poses a dilemma that has far reaching implications for an organization that 'constructs' itself as managed within an egalitarian framework.

Another example, this time about the creation of an auditorium and film theatre, also illuminates the ways in which decisions can be made outside formal collective processes. In this case, too, experienced has widened the gap between what people say they believe in and how they may actually behave.

At the time of the 1986 move to new headquarters, some DEC workers were excited about the large open space in the basement. For a long time, some people had a vision of DEC as a venue for alternative film screenings and as a space for public meetings and rallies. For this group, the empty space in the basement symbolized DEC's potential to be a rallying point, not just spiritually, but physically, for progressive movements and alternative films. On my first tour of the building, I was told by Debbie (the 'co-ordinator') that the room was to become the site of a film theatre and more generally an auditorium for public meetings and rallies. Talking to other staff, though, made me realize that not everyone had the same vision for the large room, or the same sense of a decision having been made. As with the decision to organize concerts, it seemed that some people were operating with the idea that a decision had been taken to make the space into an auditorium, with sophisticated audio visual equipment, while others considered it still

be in a process of negotiation.

Debbie, in fact, was so clear that this project had received the go-ahead that she had applied for a grant to finance the renovations. There was much agreement with this strategy in some units, particularly the film group, and a little coalition had formed to bring the plans to fruition. It was therefore of some surprise to Debbie and others when it was raised at a collective meeting as an item for debate. After the meeting, Debbie was visibly angry and said that it was typical of the way the place was operating: 'to rehash everything a hundred times'. Another worker though, has a different view:

> Perhaps some kind of tentative decision had been made, or a report made, but I don't think a real decision had been made about the creation of an auditorium. Where are we going to get the money or the staff? There is a lot of money involved here to run the place, even if we get help to renovate the space. This is really going to take a lot of thinking - there are units without enough operating funds already. I can't believe people would have gone ahead and applied for a grant when a decision had not been taken by the collective.

Interestingly, a couple of days later, Debbie indicated to me that she was going ahead with plans for the auditorium - that there were only a couple of people holding the project back and it was more important to get on with funding.

These kinds of disagreements do not happen over everything, but they do highlight the way that strong individuals and groups can make assumptions and act on their own impulses. People at DEC talk a great deal of the need to bring only policy-level issues to the collective meetings, but distinctions between policies, administrative issues and subunit issues are often not all that clear. The espoused values at DEC of working as a non-hierarchical team are often evident in practice, but

not everyone conforms to this underlying value in all of their actions, especially when they become attached very personally to a particular new direction.

Just as common at DEC, is a pattern by which decisions seem never to be taken, and where the negotiating process is never fully concluded. Some people talk of items finding a permanent place on meeting agendas and getting discussed and postponed for months and even years at a time. In some cases, these items are about changes that are far-reaching and do require substantial airing. The decision to move, for example, was on and off the agenda for a number of years before a decision was finally taken. Debate about the desirability and role of a co-ordinator is another example. Embedded in these sorts of items are the deepest fears, conflicts and aspirations of various group members, so it is not surprising that the negotiation and consensus-building process can be long. Some issues, however, become such a permanent feature of the agenda that it hard to remove them even when a decision has clearly been taken, especially when the item acts symbolically for other concerns that are not articulated as clearly. The decision to move is a striking example, best illustrated through the words of one worker:

> In the first meeting after the move people were still asking: should we be moving? I was flabbergasted! We had a two hour debate about this and similarly it was raised at later meetings. At one meeting we deferred a discussion about a $200,000 government programme because people wanted to talk about the pros and cons of the move. I don't think I can bear this much longer.

By way of summary, workers can be of two minds regarding the role of the collective in decision-making. While workers often wish that a number of important issues were more fully debated at the collective level, at the same time, they can also find the process slow,

cumbersome,time-consuming and something to be avoided.

> When I started here in 1981 I was impressed with the fact that they were the worse chaired meetings I'd every been at. It could take hours to get through something that should have taken five minutes.
>
> My attitude toward collective meetings is to try and get through them as quickly as possible and get back to the work I have to do.
>
> We have meetings that are not chaired - we have meetings without minutes - and we have a lot of strong individuals. Often we don't know what has been decided and that guarantees it will go back and then we argue about what it was that was decided.
>
> I was and am really demoralized by the meetings. I couldn't believe it. At first I chaired a couple in my style, but eventually I got brought down to the level that all you do is let everyone talk at once and some people have to talk ten times to say the same thing and we all let them do it. Even our best chaired meetings don't prohibit one person from saying the same thing five times.
>
> What we do to get them over with is sit there and fume in silence - or say it once and not feel like saying it fifty times. Chairing should be designed so that people who love to hear themselves talk don't get a chance. We have a serious shortage of active chairs. But few want the job - a good chair needs to be aware of the detail of things and at DEC that's a lot of different things. For example, any kind of financial discussion, I would refuse to chair - I wouldn't want to be the one guiding a discussion through.

Some have come to see the overall collective structure as ineffective and even anachronistic, and others argue that centralized control is imperative - and some workers can hold the two views at the same time. Although systematic or comprehensive discussion of the overall organization of DEC rarely occurs, different points of view tend to emerge and become obvious during discussions of particular issues or policies. Some participants, in fact, perceive a gradual erosion of the directing function of the collective. As an example, one worker who favours a strong and powerful role for the collective, asserted the following during an interview:

> The collective meetings are increasingly in the form of reports from the committees. These reports are often presented in a way that leaves little room for discussion - there is a decision implicit in the report itself. In the main these are small things, but over time it adds up to a reduction in the spirit of collective decision-making. What often appears as a relatively small administrative matter turns out later to have represented a fairly significant policy change. To challenge these reports is to be pigeon-holed as someone who is holding everything up and preventing the meeting from being efficient.

For many workers, the tasks and problems to do with the overall group are perceived as an add-on job, rather than a central or even critical part of what they do. Almost everyone feels that the larger organization is important in shaping their identity on the outside, but on the inside, role identification is more often linked to the work and activity of the subunit. Here are a few voices around this notion:

> In our unit we don't need meetings. Our decision-making is very informal. We disagree, but we always know what we're disagreeing about. So much of our time is spent in strictly details of business that we don't have time to consider the larger implications of things.

> People feel segregated from each other - the things that matter deeply to us (re our work) are virtually unknown to other units and vice versa.

> 95% of what I do is at my unit level. On the outside I say I work at DEC (and I like being able to say that), but on the inside I clearly work in book distributing.

> There are tensions between the differing areas. Its not surprising to me and I don't see it as the fault of DEC. A lot of the causes are historical - personal fights in the past. I see it as the fault of the work. Each group has a different relationship with the public, different sources of financing and different size. In films we have six; whereas the library has one part time person. So that in itself can lead to conflict, especially if DEC Films is seen as a block within the collective. We could be a pretty formidable group to stand up to if we were united in wanting something.

> The kind of books we choose to distribute? At one point when this operation first started-up, that was actually a question for discussion at the collective. To tell you the truth, now I don't

think of even bringing it up. I'm not sure we would want to live with the ruling - we [the subunit] would want to make that decision.

Say someone outside asks me about a project the bookstore is involved in and I don't know anything about it. I feel foolish and I get angry at the bookstore because they didn't raise it at collective, but they argue it was just a part of what they do, not a policy area. Where do you draw the line? It gets confusing, so it is usually easier to really censor what you choose to take to collective.

When I first started in films, we used to bring any new film we were thinking of buying to the collective for a decision. Can you imagine? No one would want to go through that now.

As we have seen, workers are often tempted by using less formal routes and getting on with things at either the subunit level or individually, even though the consequences may be ill will and interpersonal tension. Some people come to terms with and accept the tension and find ways to circumvent it, or in some cases people may choose to leave the organization.

Some DEC workers believe that the time has come to legitimize the 'realities' of decision-making, and Debbie is a spokesperson for this view. According to Debbie, who has been one of the architects of more centralization at DEC, and who often expressed her frustration with the turtle-like pace of collective decision-making,

The biggest issue for collectives is decision-making. For consensus to work you have to have a willingness on the part of people to agree to live with some things they don't support 100%. But what happens is that this sort of agreement just as often produces an attitude that, 'if it fails, I might be happy' - a sort of I told you so attitude, and that isn't healthy. I've reached a point where I think some people will just have to get left disagreeing - sometimes I would really like voting so that we know where people are at. With our model of consensus, I think that sometimes people don't really care all that much but feel they have to state an opinion. On the other hand, some people get so frustrated that they stop caring and 'drop-out' - or find that they want to work in a more hierarchical way. They don't want to have to discuss everything to death, and they want some decision to be

made by somebody. I for one am a bit sick of talking it all through - I want a vote system.

3.5 Summary

Growth, expansion, relocation and diversification have had a price for DEC. Not everyone on staff agrees with the way DEC has changed and is changing. The relocation to larger and much more expensive office space quickly become a symbol to different workers of both what's right and what's wrong with DEC in the late 1980's. The many complaints I heard about the heating, the disruption, the phones, and the new noises, seemed to me a general response to change, but also an expression of ambivalence, and possibly hostility, for the new, large, growing DEC. For all workers, whether supporting or merely accepting the move, it seems increasingly unclear what DEC has become.

Talking to organizational members at the peak of a major change programme was quite intense, though useful. In many ways, I was the only one with the inclination or time to listen, and workers were anxious to talk and unburden themselves. It was also good timing, as it gave me an opportunity to be with a worker-managed organization confronting issues around size, growth, diversification and decentralization. Over and over during interviews, people posed the rhetorical question: 'what is DEC?' While most workers have a firm sense of their divisional role and status, they have many concerns about the whole, either because they believe something has gone awry, or because they see it evolving into an exciting, but still undefined, new organization.

The experience of DEC illustrates one model of a worker-managed

organization. In this case the work is functionally divided among small units that operate with a high degree of autonomy. To assist with the conflicts that have developed between subunits and to facilitate overall co-ordination, the organization has created a central unit for overall administrative activities. The creation of this central unit, however, has generated a number of dilemmas and concerns for the collective.

At the conclusion of my visit, I found myself wondering if DEC had become too large and too diverse to be collectively managed. Had it crossed a threshold of size and complexity that would require more and more central co-ordination? Was the only reasonable option to create a central office to balance the conflicting needs of the units?

3.6 Update

When I contacted The Development Education Centre in the Spring of 1989, I was a bit surprised to discover that they had moved once again. The building that they had just moved to at the time of my visit proved to have been a poor choice for more reasons than the fact that the offices were spread over three floors. The landlord for the building refused to approve the plan to renovate the large open space in the basement into a film auditorium. In addition, the landlord refused to endorse several other smaller renovation schemes of the group, and declared that the building was being used in ways that had not been part of the original leasing arrangements. Apparently, relationships with the landlord became more and more untenable and when another set of offices became available down the street, a consensus emerged that another move was the superior option. The bookstore, however, felt that

it was just beginning to benefit from a drop-in trade, and negotiated with the group to remain in the old space. Hence, DEC moved its headquarters about a mile away, while the bookstore remained at the 1986 site.

Organizationally, DEC remains much the same as I reported in the case study, but with a few changes. The musical and cultural events role that was initiated by Ken is now a regularized part of the organization and this activity has been accorded the status of a subunit. The co-ordination and administration of the organization continues, Debbie said, 'to be under negotiation'. Nevertheless, both Karen and Debbie seemed more content with their jobs and indicated that the business side of DEC's work is now more routinized and that other workers appear to have accepted the changes. As an example, she indicated that DEC now has a budgeting system that provides monthly reports to the subunits and that there would probably be an outcry if this was stopped. Debbie said that as a result of numerous discussions at collective meetings, the group now has a 'picture' of what she does that fairly closely matches what she actually does.

There have been some interesting changes in personnel. Johnathan, who was perhaps most symbolic of the old way of doing things left the group. Margie, who seemed so frustrated with the collective meetings has also left. Marie, who worked in the bookstore has also moved on, partly to devote more of her time to her baby.

Perhaps the most interesting change at DEC is the fact that it now has a fully functioning audio visual theatre and offers two or three films a week. Some of these films are very esoteric and draw a small

number of people, but the majority are second runs of recent films. DEC, as a result, is now home to a repertory theatre. Patrons, of course, will probably never know or guess how much conflict and tension were a part of the theatre's conception.

CHAPTER 4

THE BODY POLITIC (TBP)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers The Body Politic (TBP - pronounced 'The BP'), a collectively-managed magazine and newspaper publisher based in Toronto, Canada. It serves primarily the gay community with two publications: a Toronto-based, freely-distributed fortnightly newspaper called Xtra; and a monthly magazine called The Body Politic, sold throughout Canada and the world. The chapter begins by providing an account of the origins and development of the organization, and then focuses on the people, structures, work routines, problems and changes that were characteristic of the group in the 1986-1987 period.

The Body Politic has a number of similarities with The Development Education Centre. It was created at about the same time, and by 1986 had fifteen years of experience behind it. Like DEC, the approach to getting the work done at TBP is decentralized, although the various work activities are highly interdependent and require a sustained degree of intergroup co-operation. Similarly to DEC, by its fifteenth year of operation, TBP had reached a sort of watershed in its history, and members of the organization were engaged in a process of reassessing both the purpose and structure of the enterprise. TBP is a work location in which individual members have often had different perceptions about the nature and purpose of the organization, and this has resulted in a negotiation process that has frequently been

conflictual.

My field research with TBP covered the months between February 1986 and March 1987. During this time I interviewed members of the organization, attended collective meetings, met people informally, read much of the available documentation, and volunteered to do odd jobs. The ethnographic account contained in this essay, therefore, reflects that time period. In the winter of 1989, I once again contacted TBP to discover what events had occurred since my original visits and the results of that inquiry are included in the form of an update at the end of the chapter.

4.2 The Making of the Collective

In its formative days, The Body Politic collective was arguably the most important voice in gay politics in Canada, and produced a gay liberation publication of international significance. The organization began as a group of three friends who decided to form a collective for the purpose of publishing a journal by, about, and for homosexuals. The Body Politic's first masthead (and all subsequent mastheads) proclaimed that 'the liberation of homosexuals can only be the work of homosexuals themselves', which was indicative of their view that gay liberation would be most likely to happen through a self-help, community effort.

The popularity and success of the publication was probably a surprise even to those who wrote and produced it. The organization was able to attract a significant number of volunteer workers, and The Body Politic magazine attracted readers and subscribers from far and wide, eventually finding its way not only into the hands of many individuals,

but also onto the shelves of a number of university libraries throughout the world. The flip side of this success, however, was a publication and an organization that many people feared and some even despised. Indeed, the fact that TBP has had both admirers and detractors has played a significant role in shaping the organization and in determining its response to the world around it.

A first trip to the offices of TBP gives little indication of its important role on the world stage. The headquarters in 1988, located on the 2nd floor of a nondescript factory building in West-end Toronto, is far away from the lucrative publishing sector which is situated downtown in the heart of the financial district. There is no sign to mark the doorway; the entrance is often full of bicycles chained to the stairwell; and the gloomy stairway, lighted by a single, exposed lightbulb, suggests an organization on the fringe. In fact, the TBP has never had much money, and has always existed on the edge of financial collapse. Although the outside is without distinction, and the location is off the beaten path, the inside is somewhat more cheerful. At the top of the landing is a small waiting room with a sofa. This area doubles as an art gallery that caters mostly to gay artists and tends to emphasize eroticism. Also at the top of the landing is Andrew, a good-looking young man who takes care of many of the administrative jobs of the organization such as answering the phone, ordering supplies and sorting the mail. It is not uncommon to see someone lingering around Andrew's desk, even though he does not encourage such behaviour. Some people believe that with enough 'chatting-up', Andrew will agree to go out with them. On the surface, this type of office behaviour is not

very unusual, as chatting-up a good-looking member of staff is often a routine part of life in many office settings. What is atypical in this setting, and what an observer might first notice, is the fact that all of Andrew's admirers are other men.

Off to the side of Andrew's desk is a set of pigeon holes, some of them overflowing with mail for members of the organization. From this point you can go to the right or left. To the left are several open-concept work stations with desks, filing cabinets and the usual paraphernalia of office life. In this area you may find any one of Ken, Gerald, Gillian, Lee, Dale or Robyn, who are all members of the paid staff, or you may find a couple of members of the very active volunteer corps. These people would be noticed doing the routine things of office life -some might be talking on the phone, some might be labouring over a pile of paper, one or two might be using a typewriter and two or three people might be having a conversation.

If you turn to the right at the landing you enter a completely different world. This area of the TBP is a very large space, which is divided into functional units. There is a number of work and social areas against the four walls and in the middle of the room is an open area which is dominated by a very large table that functions as a meeting site and unassigned work space. There is also a room with several computers, a very large production area with drafting tables, and at the back, a small room with a sophisticated typesetter. Also at the back is a large storage area with back issues of the newspaper, and off to the side is a kitchenette and unisex bathroom. In the bathroom you might want to spend more time then is functionally necessary in

order to read the literate graffiti and the twenty or so cartoons that have been pinned to the wall. One example of the humorous graffiti that tend to poke fun at the myths surrounding gay life is: 'I hear your mother made you a homosexual; if I give her the wool, will she make me one too?'

In this large area I have just described, you are most likely to find Robyn or Dale, who are mainly involved in layout and production, but like the regular office area, this space may be occupied by other staff members and volunteers. Because it is an open concept factory space, there are few inside walls. However, on one wall there is a collection of front covers for every issue of the paper since it began publishing, a display providing an encapsulated history of the gay movement in Canada over the past fifteen years.

Although the factory space is divided into two distinct areas, it is relatively small by newspaper standards, in part because the actual printing is contracted out. As a result, there is no noisy and cumbersome machinery. The environment is casual, with people wearing anything from jogging outfits to cut-off jeans and tee-shirts. It is often extremely busy. There may be twenty or more people about, or as few a two, depending on the work cycle (which I will discuss in detail later). If there is a problem in one area, it takes about two minutes to let anyone know: loud shouting is a common way of communicating.

Before learning more about the ambience and work routines of the group, and before meeting some of the members of the TBP and learning about their concerns and issues, it is helpful to acquire a sense of the history of the organization. This is particularly important at TBP

because nearly everyone refers to the past a great deal when discussing the present and future of the enterprise. It is also from an exploration of the past that we can begin to understand and appreciate many of the assumptions and values of TBP that are undergoing debate and being renegotiated during the 1986-1987 period. Fortunately, learning about the history of TBP is facilitated by the fact that a number of long term staff and volunteers are still with the organization, and by the fact that members of the organization chose to write a great deal about themselves. Over the years, many pages of The Body Politic magazine were devoted to introspection and musing by writers on the nature and operations of the group, most notably in reflective special editions that were published every five years. In this way, voices from the past have provided a somewhat extraordinary window onto their activities and thoughts.

TBP began in 1971 with the publication of The Body Politic magazine. The first issue of the magazine had fifteen pages and cost eighty-five cents. It was written and produced by three people who then 'hawked' it on the streets of Toronto to what must have been a startled public. This was a time when 'gay' still meant 'jolly', and for most people, homosexuality was something you avoided talking about in 'polite' company. As Gerald, a long term worker still on staff, told me during an interview:

> These were the days when psychiatrists were debating whether gay people were ill or merely deviant and the police were adamant that crime and homosexuality were synonymous. These were the days when the medical establishment was still talking about re-conditioning and the policing establishment could get away with comments like, 'lock them all up - we need to protect our children'.

These were also the days when all kinds of social change seemed possible, especially to those who had been nourished on the electric excitement of Vietnam War dissent. A writer for the fifth anniversary issue of TBP suggested that its birth had been:

> In the wild heat and ferment of Canada's first gay upheavals - the first demonstrations in Ottawa and at the Canadian Broadcasting Company, the first public action against police entrapment in parks. It was to give for the first time a voice to gay people across the country. Brave new world. Issue One cost $350.00, all from donations, no ads. None of us had worked on so much as a school newspaper.

In its first years, TBP was published every two months out of a backyard shed, then out of a basement and then out of the relatively stable setting of a shared stereo and TV sales shop. During this early period, everyone did a little of everything - writing, editing, typing, laying out, answering the phone, making coffee, selling, putting the paper in the bars. Ken, another long term worker still on staff, comments:

> At the time the collective activity was less abstract and it didn't seem so formal. It was much more of a cottage industry type thing. It was very small.

Gerald suggests that there had been little debate about how decisions would be made:

> We decided that the organization would function as a collective. After all, everybody was a collective back then, weren't they?'

What being a collective meant was recorded in the minutes of an early group meeting:

> Everyone will be equal, there will be no hierarchy, there will be no limits to entry, no division of labour and no specialization of tasks.

In addition, there was general agreement that the paper would be of the highest journalistic standard possible; that it would be well written

and produced; not trivial; and that it would tackle all issues to do with homosexuality. Gerald recalls the group deciding that 'there would be no sacred cows'.

In these early days, by all reports, commitment was extraordinarily strong, and gave shape to two sustaining qualities of TBP: hard work and long hours. As Rickie, a long term staff member, passionately told me in an interview: 'it was my life - I ate, breathed and slept for The Body Politic.' His comment is not a great exaggeration since three of the early workers shared a communal house, one that is fondly remembered as 'the kitchen collective'. The intensity of commitment and camaraderie among members of the commune and those who became part of the kitchen collective, however, served to exclude as much as to include, and early in its history, TBP acquired another of its sustaining qualities: an inner and an outer circle of influence. Those outside the kitchen collective - many of them volunteers - often felt alienated and without power by being outside the influential inner sanctum, and this predictably caused some early friction, factionalization and the loss of several hard workers. In a 10th anniversary issue retrospective, Gerald recalled two co-workers, Stephen and Roger, as saying that, 'they imagined the collective to be a coterie of political experts who would have no room for me', which he portrays as an illustration of his belief that the organization, early on, had an 'image problem'.

Right from the beginning, conflict over personality differences also appears to have characterized TBP. One figure at the centre of controversy was Jearld, who wrote retrospectively in the 10th

anniversary issue:

> I think the idea of the collective was my idea. I've never been interested in vertical power structure things. From the beginning I made a commitment to making it happen, to nurturing it. I had a clear idea of using the paper as an organizing tool so you could mobilize people into participating in a community. I took care of the mail and pulling things together and coordinating so that the paper could grow - though I was eventually eliminated from it. The paper was my life. Leaving really shattered me.

Speaking of Jearld, another writer comments:

> He was brutally impatient, and suspicious almost to the point of paranoia. For a longish period we were co-ordinators and worked together on a daily basis, and there were days when I would storm out, unable to spend another minute with the man. And I am known for my even temper.
>
> Jearld was kicked out of the paper finally - he says he was assassinated. Typically, the final scene was ugly. I remember he spat at one of us as he went out the door.

In that same anniversary issue, other writers also remember early years as ones in which battles raged, people left, new people joined and everything seemed under negotiation. One writer raged at a co-worker who was always 'maddeningly and infuriatingly late', but who could also rally the volunteer troops when needed.

From the beginning, it seems, there were divisions and camps. Gerald coined the terms, 'politicos' and 'basic homos', to describe the two main categories of people that found their way to the organization. The politicos were those people deeply committed to social change and prepared to work for low wages and little material benefit. The basic homos, on the other hand, as Gerald says, 'were just your average Joe homo, who craved a better and fairer world, but not at the cost of too much personal economic sacrifice'. In Gerald's view, these two groups were often at odds and could not easily resolve their differences. Taking up Gerald's view, one writer in the 10th anniversary issue

commented:

> There is a lot of politics and analysis in the pages of TBP, which is fine, but there is very little humour, despite a ritualistic yearly commitment to look for more. There used to be very little about the politics of everyday living, and there is still not enough. And, after all, we serve the average gay person just as much as the radical. If we want to bring this large group into our midst, we have to find ways of including their world in our organization and in our written word.

Even among the politicos, there were divisions. A consensus about what groups might be the friend or foe of gay liberation was virtually impossible to reach. Ken, for example, says that he was always opposed to an allegiance or alliance with any political party, while Rickie suggests less emphatically that 'a general editorial alliance with the political left was agreed upon, but even this had to be kept very fluid.' Early experience, it seemed, had taught that the organized left was inconsistent and often conservative on gay rights, and as Gerald put it:

> We came to believe, or at least came to have, an editorial policy which was constantly under debate, and always in a state of negotiation. I remember staying up half the night arguing over our support or lack of support for things. At the time, we were dealing with a human rights issue that no one else dared to touch.

In an attempt to resolve some of these conflicts and problems, monthly parties were inaugurated at the communal house and anyone associated with the paper was automatically invited. The parties soon developed a reputation as the best in the city and came to function as a significant source of volunteer recruitment as well as a social integrator. In addition, and in spite of the differences in influence and bartering for editorial control, early collective meetings included everyone and are fondly remembered as 'informally serious' and fun. The

main part of the meeting, which usually took place during a pot-luck dinner, consisted of each person reading articles out loud to one another and getting agreement to go ahead and type it for publication. As much by design as default, the decisions taken at these early meetings began to give shape to the still embryonic gay movement in Canada. What this collective chose to write about, and how they chose to deal with issues, shaped the attitudes and opinions of many who read what was at that time one of the very few 'gay' publications in the country, and by far the most substantial.

Out of these early conflicts and confrontation, the TBP changed while it survived and grew. According to most reports, by the 10th year there was still no ideological consensus, and personalities continued to clash sharply, but it did not seem to matter anymore. By this time it would seem, it had become the way things were at TBP - space had been created for a variety of personalities and political orientations. What appears to have mattered the most in terms of admission to the inner circle, and what appears by this time to have become a persistent and sustaining feature of the culture, was that a very high amount of influence was accorded to individuals who were prepared to work very hard, for very long hours. Reports also suggest that even more influence was accorded to those who had skills and expertise in political debate and writing.

In spite of internal wrangling, TBP had to grow up quickly and find ways to accommodate an ongoing influx of new volunteers. Many people, angry at the degree of discrimination they experienced, began to view TBP as a guiding light through the murky waters of homophobia.

Readership grew quickly to around 7,000, and increasing numbers of people decided to volunteer time and energy to the organization. Rickie comments:

> We seemed to do the impossible within the space of a couple of years. We became a real newspaper with subscriptions, classified ads, commercial ads, store outlets, and more work than any of us could handle.

The authorities, in particular the police, watched the rapid success of TBP with a critical eye, always ready to jump on the slightest infraction of a selectively interpreted 'public morality'. Two confrontations with the police are now legend. Issue 18 detailed the way in which the 'straight' Toronto press had consistently refused ads from gay people and were generally bigoted in their reporting. The Toronto morality squad lifted Issue 18 (May-June 1975) from the stands and threatened to close the offices using the excuse that a comic strip in the newspaper showed two men in a passionate embrace. An even more legendary example is the massive raid of the offices that took place after an article about paedophilia was published in November 1977. The police stripped the offices of every bit of paper they could get their hands on, including the subscription list (some say with much relish). The court case that followed absorbed tens of thousands of dollars, mostly raised by appeals, and lasted over five years, in part as a result of crown appeals of not-guilty verdicts. In the end, TBP won.

Such notoriety had an effect somewhat opposite to what the police may have expected. A number of influential civil libertarians and human rights groups were prepared to be openly associated with TBP, and the volunteer complement of gay activists grew and grew. Thus, very early in its history, TBP achieved its goal of becoming not only a publisher,

but also a cause. More than ever, it became a nucleus for gay political and social activities, creating news as much as reporting it.

TBP's genesis as a voice for gay liberation in a hostile world, appears to have provided the organization with something that it needed to nourish and sustain its hard work ethos - the presence of an enemy or threat. Gerald comments:

> We were always at our best when we could eye-ball our enemies. There could be nothing like the sight of a big burly cop rummaging around the office to get the troops mobilized. After the raid, we hung the newspaper headlines in the office - we were all a bit proud of ourselves for having shaken up the establishment, and every time we looked at those headlines it was clear who we were fighting.

In late 1976, TBP moved from garages and basements to the fifth floor of a former factory. This move reflected further growth and grand ideas. The magazine was now being published monthly in tabloid format, and by this time there was a paid staff of five, and every area of the work had increased.

This growth had a profound impact on the organization of the work. Two workers from the time reflected on how the approach to getting the work done had changed:

> At first we had a commitment to participate in everything: writing, editing, production, selling, evaluating the paper - we shared everything, good and bad. Gradually people found that they had a talent for some particular thing and it seemed easy to let them get on with it.

> We just grew over time - people became more and more interested in some things then others and they became specialized - we never made a conscious decision to specialize, it was all very natural.

Ken, commenting on the change from job rotation to more specialization, says:

> When we started the magazine, we did so instinctively, but over the

> years we had to become more conscious of what we were doing and become more deliberate in achieving a certain effect and that in turn led to the development of expertise in certain areas. None of us had experience in publishing whatsoever. Over the years various people in the organization made attempts to acquire the skills and that started to differentiate people. My personal experience was that I found it to be very frustrating doing some writing, some display advertising, some layout, some promotion. I felt very strongly about wanting one job. It was a common complaint at the time - people having too many little jobs. It also had to do with the drive to be more deliberate. We realized that to do it well, we needed people who could do it well.

Not only had the organization of the work changed, but by the 10th year there was also sharpened debate about the entire nature of the enterprise. Tim, a long term volunteer member of the group, recalls that:

> We all started wondering what the next wave of homopolitics should be like, and there was no real consensus at an ideological level.

For some commentators, the earlier differences of perspectives were still being overcome - a view reflected in the editorial of the 10th anniversary issue:

> The collective process can sound high-minded, even noble. In practice, it is, as often as not, messy, quarrelsome and mean. It has had its victims. As long as we have to try to make it work within a society that exalts an egotistical variety of individualism and downgrades co-operation, the process cannot be other than uneven and uncertain. The struggle for collectivity is never won; the tattered fabric just barely holds together from issue to issue. But that's enough.
>
> We want to inspire, both in what we publish and in how we publish it. We often fail and, worse, we sometimes don't even try. But sometimes we succeed and it's those small successes that have allowed The Body Politic to survive.

For others, though, the 10th anniversary of the organization was a time to ponder new and deeper concerns about the direction of the magazine and the energy behind it. As one writer in the 10th anniversary issue pointed out:

> We started as excited activists talking to other excited activists and we by-passed or even alienated many others by sounding like arrogant intellectuals preaching the word about what was good for gay people. But you have to be sure people are listening if you want to talk to them. You tend to be less excited, anyway, after fighting five years for the same thing.

By 1980 as a result, the organization was a bit shaky and lacked a clear focus, partially a product of its own growth. Its success had helped to create a more diverse and discerning gay market. Many gay people, it seemed, thought that the battle for gay rights had been won. A survey of readers from this time indicated that they were discontent with the magazine. Some wanted a lot more on entertainment, with a lighter, less political touch, and others wanted an even harder political punch. One group of readers felt the paper was too 'Toronto-centric' and another group felt it was not focussed enough on Toronto, where most of the action was taking place.

In response to these concerns, the organization decided to introduce a second publication called Xtra, to be geared exclusively to the Toronto market. Xtra proved to be a success, and quickly found a market and a sufficient number of advertisers to support it as a free community newspaper.

While Xtra solved, or at least defused, the external problems to do with readers and markets, it failed to extinguish or resolve problems on the inside. In spite of marketing success, it seems that some long term workers were tired and less clear what they were fighting for, and with this sort of confusion, sustaining the hard work and long hours ethos became problematic. Recollections from collective retreats of the time are about discontent, lack of goal consensus and just plain being tired.

According to Gerald:

> We were all tired, maybe a bit burnt out. Increasingly we couldn't agree on even minor things and the bigger issues began to seem insurmountable. Splits over the editorial policy and direction of the paper were eating away at the heart of our collective and democratic spirit.

At the same time, some members were beginning to wonder if the high level of conflict that had developed over the years could continue to go unaddressed and unabated. In Ken's view, the organization should have been more concerned with developing satisfactory ways of dealing with conflict, but was not. Looking back, he posits: 'The collective, way back then, refused to develop expertise for dealing with conflict, and we are still not very good at it'.

The paper and the organization might have changed significantly at this point if it had not been for an event that took place in the winter of 1981. On February 5th, the Toronto Police raided several of the sauna baths that were frequented by gay men. Raids had happened before, but never in such a systematic manner and with so much brute force. One bath was damaged to the point that it never reopened, and in total over 300 men were arrested and charged with being 'found-ins' or 'keepers' of a common bawdy house.

Once again TBP had something it seemed to need - a tangible symbol of oppression to rally around. The court trials and political mobilization arising from the baths raids created the ingredients for a tailor-made rejuvenation. Everyone became starved for news; everyone was angry; lots of people were ready to make a commitment; and the organization experienced a renaissance. Any problems TBP had been having before this event were quickly forgotten: this was like the

early halcyon days, and things were ticking with excitement. Rickie, in recalling this period, says:

> It was a bit amazing - there we were one day feeling tired, directionless, unhappy and thinking about closing shop, and then the next day, after the bath raids, everyone all of a sudden had the energy for ten hour days. You could see the smoke coming out of some people's nostrils, they were so angry.

About a year after the bath raid came another crisis in the gay community - AIDS. This crisis was less immediately apparent than the police busts or the bath raids, and a couple of years passed before its full impact came to be felt at TBP. The threat of AIDS to the gay community might well have given TBP another crisis around which to rally, but it appears to have had the effect of provoking a monumental, and troubling rethink within the organization. For years TBP had argued for a more liberated approach to sexuality. Readers were encouraged to experiment, and part of this experimentation was about having multiple sexual partners. Now there was a medical issue getting in the way of this message, and TBP did not quite know how to respond. Many of the things that TBP had been telling its readers over the years suddenly became suspect. Even though the editorial policy regarding the politics of sexuality had been the subject of considerable debate in the past, the onset of AIDS meant that such debates were now cast in a life and death perspective.

By 1986, when the full horror of AIDS was apparent, a sense of uncertainty about the organization's and the magazine's mission persisted, even though there were some obvious signs of success. By this point, The Body Politic magazine had become sixty to seventy pages a month, with a readership of over 7,000, selling for $2.50. It was

available in many corner stores throughout Toronto and many fewer people seemed shocked by its presence. The magazine was being produced on a sophisticated typesetter and had won a commendation from the Canadian Periodical Sellers Association. The kitchen collective had long since disappeared and many of the original staff and volunteers have moved on to new projects or careers. For example, two of the early paid staff are now active in the AIDS help network. And, as a startling reminder of the times, several of the early workers have died from AIDS.

The central management unit for the organization continues to be the entire collective, which meets bi-monthly in the evening. There is still the occasional social event, but more often than not this means going off to a bar together after working, rather than to an organized house party. In part, this reflects the fact that the Toronto gay community is now so diverse and organized that there is a large number of opportunities for socializing outside TBP circles. One gay organization, for example, presents monthly fund-raising dances that attract crowds of over 2,000.

On this note, let us go back up the stairs of the dimly lighted stairwell and into the 1986 headquarters of TBP for a sense of the ambience and of the people that currently inhabit the organization.

4.3 Collective workers

In 1986, TBP continues to be a community effort and the seven paid staff are greatly assisted by volunteer workers. Everyone on staff and in the volunteer pool is gay. Whatever the other differences in outlook, this shared sexual orientation creates a camaraderie that is

very strong, most noticeable in the vocabulary, humour and exaggerated gestures used by most people who frequent the office. The uninitiated would need a considerable amount of time to catch on to the jokes, banter and mannerisms that are a natural part of life at TBP. Female and male pronouns are often misused, and the lines between male and female behaviour are often fuzzy and the subject of joking. Terms of endearment, such as 'dear' and 'honey', are frequently used to open or close sentences, with an air of disdain for the usual social restrictions around gender behaviour. People openly admire each other, and sexual overtones are a natural part of the ambience. One worker explained it as,

> a bit like a gay bar. Here we can assume that everyone has the same general sexual interests and shares a code. You don't have to worry about offending straight men by admiring their crotch - the men here may not respond to your attentions, but they know the score. I don't know if I could ever return to a 'straight' work world - it would all seem so strange.

To heterosexuals, TBP might seem an upside-down world, but most gay people are 'culturally' in the know and need little orientation. Many gay people find the 'safe' world of TBP enormously refreshing and comforting, a world where everyone else can relate to the experience of being radically different in a hostile society. 'War stories' abound, and the self-help nature of the organization undoubtedly serves as a social glue. In fact, telling one's 'coming out' story - that is, the circumstances under which one first openly declared him or herself as gay to parents and friends - borders on an initiation rite.

To be part of the Body Politic organization, mere gayness is not nearly enough to fit in. There continues to be a high value attached to hard work, long hours and high commitment. It is not uncommon for paid

staff to work ten hour days and still be around on the week-end. There is always something to do and something to write, and never enough time. Volunteers, of course, can give less time, but many give extraordinary amounts of their 'free' time. As will become apparent when we meet some of the workers, though, these values and norms are being debated in the 1986 period more openly than at any other time in the organization's history.

A characterization of the people at TBP must take into account the large numbers of people who have become directly or indirectly involved with what the enterprise has become. It is probably accurate to say that everyone who reads the newspaper feels in some way a part of the organization. Letters to the editor come from throughout the world, and people as far away as Japan write fondly of the organization and its people, even though they have only the contact provided by the printed word. While I was on site, a reader from Halifax (a city 1500 miles from Toronto) dropped-in 'just to see where it all happens', and this was not considered an unusual event. For those closer to Toronto, the BP's offices are as much a drop-in centre as a publisher, although less so than in the past. The telephone is used both as a business tool and a crisis help-line.

TBP has come to have four layers of participants. There is first an inactive outer layer of readers and subscribers from all over the world. This group obviously have little to do with running the organization, outside of moral and financial support through their subscriptions. Second, there is a group of friends and supporters that go a step further and offer not only political and emotional support,

but often gift wrap their good wishes with significant amounts of money. This group is called 'the sustainers', and they receive a quarterly newsletter that attempts to keep them up to date while at the same time impressing them with the ongoing need for funds. Third, there is a fluctuating number of volunteers who work anywhere from a few hours a month to several days a week at the paper. In March 1986, there were about twenty-five people in this volunteer group. Finally, there is an inner circle of highly committed volunteers and paid workers that constitute the managing collective. Staff are automatically members of the collective and volunteer workers become eligible for collective membership after six months (although most choose not to assume this added responsibility). In mid-March 1986, the managing collective consisted of seven paid staff and six volunteers.

Volunteers came from every walk of life - lawyers, accountants, doctors, university professors, civil servants, store clerks, artists and the unemployed. This cross-section of people serves two roles - a diverse source of talent and expertise to draw on in running the business and producing the papers, and, as one member described it, 'an ear in most sectors of the wider community.' TBP usually knows what is happening right across the city, whether in the arts, in gay associated life, or government offices.

Two fairly different volunteer members of the managing collective are Tim and David. By the late winter of 1986, Tim has been on TBP collective for over a decade, whereas David has been active for just two years. Tim, who has a Masters degree in Education, works for the Toronto Board of Education as a race relations officer, preparing and

delivering seminars and workshops designed to improve race and ethnic interaction amongst school children. He is also a member of the Marxist Institute of Toronto and is active in the Spanish Community Centre. Obviously he is a busy man, but finds time to devote a minimum of ten hours a week to TBP work. Most people like Tim - he combines a sharp, analytical mind with a soft-spoken, warm and generous manner that is appealing. Very little seems to fluster Tim, and at meetings his is very often the rational, summarizing voice.

Tim feels that finding a balance and harmony in all aspects of life is the secret to happiness and success, revealing an Eastern variant of philosophy that guides much of his thinking. He compares the ideal working of a collective to one of his athletic activities:

> In karate, there is an environment of respect and acceptance. Criticism of technique must be followed by 'thank you' on the part of both parties. The one giving the criticism is thankful for the opportunity to teach and share knowledge; the receiver is thankful for the opportunity to learn and improve. It is a mutual dependence and this should be the way of work.

In this regard, Tim suggests that the biggest problem for a collective is findings ways to improve human behaviour and relationships, so that any tendency people have to dominate or withdraw are balanced by feelings of commitment and investment. He says, 'competence of any kind has to be complemented by social adeptness', adding that this has nothing to do with the ability to manipulate and everything to do with caring and sharing.

He feels that TBP has often fallen short of his ideal view of organizational and social life. As an example, he remembers a time when newcomers were 'sized-up' and 'if the old guard took a shine to you [meaning sexually], you were more welcome in the group', and, he says,

'there is still a lot of that sort of attitude around'. Tim also sees influence at TBP arising out of skills, and feels that, ideally, organizations such as TBP should find ways to prevent skills from becoming such centres of power. Tim says that he continues his active role with the organization for many of the same reasons that brought him to it in the first place, and remarks:

> Any group that is not part of the established order of things has to gain power through collective action. I joined TBP as a political move as I felt that it was the strongest force around in bringing gay people together to achieve their own liberation. I continue to be active for the same reason.

David also joined TBP with political motives. As a political scientist at the University of Toronto, he felt that he wanted to enlarge his sphere of political activity to include community activism as well as teaching and traditional research activities. David is a more intense person than Tim and has less time for finding things like 'balance' or 'harmony'. David describes himself as a 'pragmatist' and says he likes to get on with things. For David, the end result is what matters most, and he believes that organizational method should be selected on the basis of what works, rather than some idealized notion of what would be nice. Nevertheless, David is guided by an ideology of democracy and a variant of socialism that he says, 'doesn't really have an established label'. He sees the world as an unjust and unfair place in which minorities such as gay people, and other groups such as women, get the short end of the stick. Although he views the capitalist economy as contributing a great deal to social and material inequality, he is uncertain about what better form of economic structure might replace it.

Unlike Tim, David joined TBP with few of what he calls 'illusions' about the nature of collective organizations. He says:

> I didn't start by celebrating collectivism. What an organization calls itself isn't important to me - I think beyond a formal structure and beyond what people say. I had no illusions that this was an organization in which everyone was involved in all decisions. If the word [collective] means a kind of solidarity, an arrangement by which everyone would have an overview of the operation, I knew this wasn't going to be the case.

David's rise from volunteer to member of the managing collective was very quick, partly because he is a paragon of the hard work ethos that is so welcomed at TBP, and partly because of his administrative and public relations savvy. David, soon after his initial entry into the organization, took on the job of co-ordinating communications with the sustainers group. In this job, he prepares a letter to the sustainers every couple of months as a way of keeping them in touch with what is going on and as a way of continuing to impress them with the financial requirements of the organization.

David also takes on other jobs. He has demonstrated his analytical and writing skills on several occasions by preparing editorials, and, along with a student of his from the University, co-authored a long, well researched article that summarized public attitudes to homosexuals. This article brought together the results of survey and polling information from the previous twenty-five years in North America and Britain. In a less intellectual vein, David is also known for having found a huge meeting table in storage at the University, refinishing it, and getting it moved to the offices.

In 1986, the seven full-time paid staff at TBP all receive the same low salary of $12,000 a year and modest benefits. Paid workers are

expected to work thirty-seven hours a week plus another twenty hours a week as volunteers. This philosophy is based on the idea that most volunteers have full time jobs and still volunteer a large number of hours. All of the staff are white, ranging in age from early twenties to early forties. Although all of the staff do some writing and participate generally in the publication of the papers, each person has a fairly clearly defined area of activity. Ken is mainly involved in gathering news from within Canada, and co-ordinates the publication of Xtra; Gerald's main area of concern is with subscriptions and finance; Gillian co-ordinates book reviews and feature articles; Andrew acts as the office person and new volunteer co-ordinator; Dale, Lee and Robyn are involved mainly in layout and production. All of these activities are assisted by volunteer labour.

Ken has been with TBP since issue number 8. First, he worked as a volunteer, then went to part-time staff, and has been on full-time staff for nearly six years. In another setting, Ken might be thought of as an editor since he has a take-control, authoritative manner, along with very strong views about what TBP should be doing. In fact, as we shall see when we hear from other staff, there is a perception that Ken does sometimes assume the role of editor.

Ken is extremely articulate. He reports that he has had to balance his natural inclination to take control with the realities of the organization, and comments:

> When you're in this kind of situation where there is no hierarchy, you develop a schizophrenic attitude. On the one hand, you enjoy the freedom that it involves, and on the other hand, you get resentful when you find there is something you can't do on your own. Sometimes you want someone to tell you what to do, and other times you want to tell everyone else what to do. I have times when

> I think it would be nice to have someone in authority to blame for whatever is going wrong.

Much of Ken's personal history with the organization reflects his ambivalence about both the collective structure and the editorial policies. He says that in 1979,

> Things were not going in the direction I wanted them to so I pulled back and went to work for Contact magazine. That caused quite a stir, as people realized not only how much I had been doing, but also that you could leave the organization. Contact, I soon learned, also had its problems, so I returned, but I think that what I did proved that people could leave and that individuals had needs that were not being fully met.

Ken has seen a lot of changes in the organization and prefaces many of his remarks with reference to how things used to be relative to how they are now. For Ken, the organization has had its ups and downs and he has had moments when he thought of giving it all up, but in the final analysis he says he is a journalist and a gay activist and that only TBP can give him an opportunity to be the two things together. Nevertheless, by its fifteenth year, Ken wonders if the organization can change anymore.

> I don't think this place is capable of changing. After a while any place develops its own way of doing things and I don't think we could change to another mode of doing things - it might happen without us noticing, although I doubt that. Our way of thought is so shaped by the circumstances we have created, that to look at things differently would be too hard.

Gerald, another long term worker still on the collective, shares some of Ken's concerns, but frames his views in a jovial, humorous manner that reflects his much easier going approach to life in general and TBP in particular. Characteristic of the way he uses language is his revelation that he has a 'homo-occupation'. In fact, it is Gerald who has created many of the funny turns of speech that are soon picked

up by others and subsequently become embedded in the language of TBP. Gerald sees himself as primarily a writer and there is widespread agreement that he has written some of the very best articles and features ever published by the magazine. He also does some free-lance writing for other publications.

Gerald has been with TBP since 1972; the first issue that he worked on was number 7. Gerald says that his motive for working at TBP, aside from getting to write for a living, is primarily political - like most others, he wants to be part of a process of politicizing gay people and having a pivotal role in changing the power position of homosexuals in society. On the down-side, he says that he wishes the organization could pay him more money, and at the age of forty, he thinks it's time he was able to afford a car.

More than Ken, perhaps, he likes the idea of working in a collective:

> In almost a snobbish way I want to be in a collective. I want to be with a group of people that are as dedicated and talented as I am. I don't want to be or to become a boss.

Although he likes the idea of collective management, he acknowledges that in practice it has been a difficult form of organization to effect. He says that there are so many perceptions of what a collective is, and that over the years people have arrived with quite different ideas about how the organization should operate. Gerald's own view of a collective is similar to Tim's, and he talks of 'balancing wills', 'finding harmony', 'making connections' and 'forgiving and forgetting'. He says that a particularly important ingredient for any collective is the presence of a 'common need'. Without this, he posits, the group has

little to make it a group. Insofar as TBP is concerned, he sees this common need as arising out of a common sense of oppression and a vision of an improved future.

As with Tim, David and Ken, Gerald experiences TBP as having a great deal of conflict. He sees the roots of this conflict in the divergent views of what gay liberation is, and in the variety of opinions about how to best achieve it. More than the others, however, he says that he can live with a fairly high degree of conflict and that it is 'best to not deal with some conflict and just accept it'. He indicates that TBP has traditionally used 'the freeze-out' as 'the ultimate method for punishing', even though experience has taught that it is not always effective, and has created 'moments of intense hostility'. He says that 'politeness is needed, but the issue is when to break it'.

Gerald has a philosophical perspective on TBP and generalizes this view to most other collectives. He hypothesizes that collectives have a sort of cyclical nature, comparing them to bio-rhythms in which there are good times, bad times, and in-between times. He posits that a collective must come to understand itself and learn why it works well in some periods and not in others, adding that in his view, TBP has no real sense of its 'historical success or failure'.

Gillian, Andrew, Dale, Lee and Robyn are all fairly new to the staff group, reflecting the turnover and staff additions of the last three years. Gillian is in her early thirties and the others are in their mid-twenties. In every case, they had worked for TBP in a volunteer capacity before joining the paid staff. Gillian, Lee and

Robyn are female, which reflect attempts to alter the predominately male occupation of the organization. These newer staff members appear to have little sense of the past events that have been so important in the life of the organization. They are too young to have been part of the early organizing activities around gay liberation; too young to have been active during the bath raids; and too young to recall the earlier confrontations with the police. Although newer staff members quickly learn of the history of TBP, and have in their own way agreed to incorporate these stories, legends and myths into their working vocabulary, they remain somewhat aloof from them. One of the assumptions that appears to be most problematic for younger staff members to accept fully is the idea that one must give one's life to the organization. This reluctance expresses itself in several ways. First, new staff members are less ready to make TBP the exclusive focus of their political interests; and second, they are less willing to work the sort of hours that in the past were normalized and expected.

Lee's philosophy and attitude is perhaps typical of the thoughts and assumptions of newer staff. She told me that she was 'just a kid' and 'not even out' when many of the significant events in the life of TBP were taking place:

> Many of the things that happened here are not part of my history as a lesbian. I can appreciate their importance in the gay liberation movement, but I can't really get in touch with them. Sometimes I feel the organization is trapped by its history and can't move on. We have to find new issues to rally around - issues that are current and relevant for the younger generation of gay activists; otherwise, we won't attract new people with new ideas.

Lee has been on staff for about two years and says that she is torn between returning to University and remaining with the group. She

indicates that working at TBP may prove to be a temporary or stop-gap activity. She says that she is committed to gay liberation, but also has other personal and political interests. As a newcomer to the organization, Lee indicates that she arrived with no particular set of concerns, but soon learned that there was a particular set of values she was expected to adopt. Although she thinks she has acquired the requisite political language and accepts this aspect of TBP, she is less accepting of the expectation to work a fifty or sixty hour week. In her words:

> Everyone already works too many hours and still there is a sense that there is more to do and that nothing is perfect. In my view, we have already over-reached our capacity and already do more than we are capable of. There is an incredible standard set here which is not geared to the reality of available staff and money. There is an ideal that seems to have little relationship to the real capability of the organization. I want room for a life outside the organization.

Lee also wonders if the collective management structure has lost some of its relevance. She says she wavers between thinking that the collective structure has produced, 'a) no bosses, b) all bosses, c) some bosses, and d) each person is their own boss', and wonders if any of these situations is helpful. Lee indicates that she often finds herself going to Ken or Gerald or more established volunteers for help and guidance and says that she would not have a great deal of difficulty if Ken or someone else were formally designated an editor. In her view, such a move would actually solve some of the problems she has observed, because, she says, 'It would make explicit some of the power and influence that is now implicit'. If Ken were designated editor, she posits:

> At least I could challenge his decisions and actions - now we have

to pretend that Ken hasn't made a lot of the decisions, so it makes it hard to confront him when you disagree.

Lee also wonders if life at TBP would be simpler and more predictable with the introduction of more standardized policies and procedures. She cites the example of proof-reading as an area where there are already very rigid standards, and since this seems to work well, she wonders if more rules might help in other aspects of the organization.

The other newer workers echo many of the opinions and concerns raised by Lee. During my interviews with the newer group of workers, one theme emerged time and time again. Like Lee, newer members of the organization wonder if the collective structure has outgrown its usefulness and if it is able, in the late 1980's, to provide the necessary leadership. The views of Andrew, the newest worker, are illustrative.

I have already introduced Andrew, who can usually be found sitting at the desk at the entrance to the offices. Andrew has been on staff for only half a year, and is both the youngest and newest staff member in the organization. It is difficult to get Andrew to agree to be interviewed, and he is inclined to discourage casual conversation. When I first tried to arrange an interview, Andrew told me: 'I don't think I have much to say', and 'You'd probably get more by talking to people who have been here longer'. Finally, after several attempts, he agreed to have a 'talk', and contrary to his own view of his importance, had a number of keen observations on the organization. At his request, we locate a fairly quiet place near the back of the building for a private conversation, but even then he keeps looking around to see if anyone is

listening.

When I asked Andrew why he was attracted to the organization he tells me:

> Before I came here I was just a guy from Scarborough [suburb of Toronto]. I did not even read the TBP and I didn't read the regular newspaper very much and I watched a lot of TV. I'm sure I didn't know what was going on. Finding my way to TBP was connected with a decision I made to change my life, and was part of coming to terms with being gay.
>
> Initially I saw it as a political forum and I've always been interested in politics. I started writing in a volunteer capacity as a way of expressing myself in political terms. When the administrative job opened, I decided to give up my regular job - which I hated - and come here full time. I came here with very high expectations.

I asked Andrew if the organization had lived up to his expectations and he said:

> Once I was here, I found it excessive. It takes a lot of my spare time and I work a lot of extra hours. I really don't have much of a personal life, but that's a choice I had to make. My life was lacking in direction, so when I came here I got involved to the extent that I am now by a conscious decision that this was where my energy would go and that this was where my gratification would come from. I'm not involved in a relationship or anything like that. For now I've blocked all of that out. If I had a relationship I'm not sure this would be feasible. But I think of it as having put those things on hold - I'm not sure this is how I want my life to be in the long term.

Andrew continues by telling me that working at TBP,

> has made me feel positive about my sexuality. Mind you, you have to put up with a lot of shit - you hear a lot of the negative stories about gay life - but you still feel you are working for something, for a cause - that you are part of a process. I'm more open now to the oppression that exists. Now I get all the behind-the-scenes stuff that comes into the office, especially because I open the mail and answer the phone.

Although Andrew told me that he liked working at TBP and his words expressed a lot of enthusiasm, his body language and almost monotone voice suggested to me that his words did not tell the whole story. My sense that Andrew was frustrated with the organization and in particular

with his lack of influence in the group was confirmed by him several weeks after our interview when he submitted what he titled 'a personal report' to his co-workers. His report, although not acted upon by the group, provides an interesting look at how a newcomer had come to view TBP. In his report, he indicated:

> Whenever we post a job for paid staff, it is advertised as 'team effort'. In the time I have been here, I find that part of the job description to be totally erroneous. Perhaps 'group effort' but certainly not 'team'. Therein lies the largest problem in this office: isolation of effort. I remember when I first began working here and I said that it would be a good idea if staff drew up a brief description of their duties. This was literally laughed off. You'll find out, I was told. Well, guess what? I haven't yet; in many cases, I don't have a clue as to who does what certain duty or how some people spend their day. This desire to know how others organize their days or what they do should in no way be construed as imposing on other people's routines. I feel uncomfortable working here a lot of the time, and I want to see people who start working here not fall into the same grove, as well as seeing the rest of us striving to work together, not apart.

If Andrew's words and thoughts provide a sense of what it can be like to be 'the new kid at TBP', then Rickie's message is very different indeed because, as Rickie says, 'I've been with this organization for ever - I'm one of the dinosaurs'. He began his association with the group at issue ten and highlights the centrality of the collective to his life by saying: 'I can't remember when this thing wasn't central to how I spend my time and how I define myself'. Rickie began as a volunteer, went on staff as soon as a paid position materialized, stayed on staff for over a decade, and then formed a partnership with a co-worker to run a free-lance graphics and typesetting business. Nonetheless, Rickie might just as well have stayed on staff, as he is around as much as anyone, works extraordinarily hard for the group, and continues his leadership role in the organization. This somewhat

schizophrenic life of working a small business and spending so much time at TBP is aided by the fact that his business is located in the same factory building.

Rickie is a whirl-wind of energy and it can be difficult to get him to sit still long enough for a chat. Conversations with Rickie are further complicated by the fact that he is inclined to freely associate ideas, mixing themes and thoughts at random. One minute he is recalling an anecdote from the past, and the next minute he is hypothesizing a radically different future for the organization. He suggests that we talk over dinner and takes me to a noisy restaurant where he proceeds to talk for nearly an hour. We were probably a curious sight: me furiously taking notes, him talking nonstop and gulping his food.

Rickie tells me that he was attracted to TBP for three main reasons. First, in its early days it was the only viable outlet for his personal and political agenda to do with gay liberation; second, he liked the way everyone seemed so committed and hard working; and third, he thought it might be a good location to find a boyfriend. He says that the first two perceptions proved to be accurate and have continued to be a motivating force, but he never did find a lover - try as he might.

Rickie says that in his opinion the collective has always worked best when there were shared values, assumptions and understanding among the membership. Regrettably, he suggests, this has not always been the case. As with other people such as Gerald, Ken and Tim, who have been around for a long time, he characterizes TBP as having had ups and downs - good times and bad times.

> This is maybe self-evident, but The Body Politic has always worked best when we had a clear-cut sense of the enemy - we have always needed something stronger than a generalized sense of a rotten society; we have been at our best when we could focus our anger around a bad guy. I remember in the aftermath of the bath raids we organized the burning of an effigy of the Attorney-General and I thought: this is precisely what people need. With that image in my mind, I could stay up half the night writing and typesetting, and still find time to help out in production the next night.

Continuing to echo themes expressed by others, Rickie says that over the years the organization failed to pay sufficient attention to new people. 'We didn't really welcome newcomers,' he says, adding, 'We used the sink-or-swim approach to orientation and I'm sure we lost a lot of good people that way'.

On a more positive note, Rickie indicates that he feels the organization had been able to 'empower people', clarifying that he means both workers and readers. In a collective, he says,

> Everyone should feel the power to do things - to influence decisions and directions. I think that we achieved this through the development of subgroups, but I know that a lot of people feel that overall decisions about policy and content are made by a select few. I don't know how you get around this in an organization of our size and complexity. What we tried to do was to make the collective meetings very open so that those people who wanted leadership roles could at least have a go at it.

Additionally, he posits, a collective such as TBP changes over the years and has to rethink how it can best achieve its goals.

> Some people seem to believe that 'once a collective, always a collective'. I think that the collective approach served us well in the past, but now I'm not so sure. New people seem to want less hours and seem to want to maintain other bases of activity in their lives. In my opinion, lots of people want more structure - they want to come in and do something concrete, but don't want to be involved in trying to run the place or making decisions. I sometimes get really annoyed when people comment that not everyone is involved in decision making - how do you get 25 people involved in making decisions, especially when two thirds of them don't want to be involved anyway?

Other members of the organization often hold Rickie up as an

exemplar of what TBP represents. Not only is he an inspired writer, a hard worker and a self-sacrificer, he also embodies many valued personal qualities. He has a good eye for the 'boys', and a witty conversational style that has garnered him many admirers. At the same time, though, some commentators put Rickie into a 'category' similar to the one often used for Ken. David sums it up by saying that,

> for a long time many BP'ers would have described Rickie as more-or-less editor. Less so now, I guess, as Ken seems to have assumed that position, but Rickie has not always been as 'democratic' as he could be.

There are many other individuals who collectively make-up the TBP organization. Chris, for example, stands out as the only woman who has been part of the collective since near the beginning, and others have made their mark on the TBP in a variety of ways. Some have acquired a position of importance through their writing, others stand out as a result of their long hours in production and layout, and others are remembered because of the time they have spent on low profile jobs such as distribution. And, as we learned by considering the history of the group, some people such as Jearld are remembered by the fact that they did not fit in and were expelled or left voluntarily. As we have seen, many of the concerns and issues voiced by individuals continue to be evocative of themes from the past - the requirement for political finesse, conflict over editorial policy, disproportionate influence, and hard work being the most obvious. In the 1986-1987 period, we can see that some of the sustaining values and assumptions of TBP are being openly debated. For example, the hard work ethos, with its requirement for total devotion to the organization, is being challenged not only by new staff members, but also by seasoned staff members such as Ken. By

this time as well, there is a less articulated sense of who the enemy is, and the crisis to do with AIDS seems less able to rally the troops than did crises of the past. The burly police officer of the raids and busts, the homophobic Attorney-General, and the conservative judges in the courtroom, remain as symbols of the enemy, but with time they have become more and more ghost-like, and particulary for new staff, mainly the stuff of legends.

By 1986, there is a changing sense of what is and what is not sustaining the organization. At one level, there is a quality to the group that suggests similarities with the past in terms of ambience and work routines; at another level, there is a sense that life at TBP is in a state of change and that the values and assumptions acquired from the past are less and less able to integrate and solidify the group. From my observations and conversations with staff during the 1986 period, I came to the view that becoming an insider to the organization required me to appreciate these two levels of reality. One the one hand, life at TBP seemed to be little changed from the way it had been characterized by reports from the past. There continued to be a great deal of work to be done and everyone rallied around and got it done - conflict, disagreement and uneven influence being set aside or temporarily forgotten in order to meet the publishing goals. On the other hand, life at TBP gave the appearance of being 'up in the air', by which I mean something more than conflict over things such as editorial policy - more a sense that there was a process of ongoing negotiation about the entire future of the organization.

To come to an understanding of these qualities in the organization,

it is instructive to first consider the work routines and then to focus on decision making and the patterns of conflict that persist. By considering the work routines it is possible to get some sense of the quite co-operative nature of the organization. Getting the work done involves a very high degree of interdependence and helps to explain how totally disabling conflict has been avoided. A more detailed consideration of decision making, however, not only brings to light the sorts of conflict and bartering that have traditionally been part of life at TBP, but illuminates the more current debates about the future of the organization.

4.4 Work Routines

Throughout its history, and in spite of significant differences of opinion about content, personality differences and competition for editorial control, getting the actual work done (that is, producing two publications), has required and usually received an enormous co-operative response. As we have seen, in its early days, The Body Politic magazine was put together by a small group of people who did a little of everything. Over the years, though, this approach to the work was replaced by the development of more specialized roles and jobs, and eventually by the creation of sub-areas which assumed responsibility for particular aspects of the publications.

By the early 1986 period, the collective effort entailed in producing The Body Politic had been divided into five main subgroups, each with a co-ordinator from the paid staff group, and a corps of volunteers. As I have already mentioned, at the time of my visits, Ken

co-ordinated the Canadian news subgroup; Gillian co-ordinated the Features and Reviews area (also called 'Midmag'); Robyn and Dale jointly co-ordinated the layout and production gang; Gerald looked after the subscriptions and display advertising; and Andrew, in addition to his general administrative tasks, took responsibility for classified advertisements and general volunteer co-ordination. In addition to these subgroups, other jobs and tasks were organized around some of the more active volunteers. A man named Robert organized the monthly distribution of the publications; Charles and a group of other people monitored the world news.

The number of people in each subgroup depends on the volume of work and the amount of time that the various people can offer. In Ken's subgroup, for example, there were officially nineteen people, but most of these were 'contacts' in major cities across Canada that provided a monthly report of regional activities. The Toronto-based group that monitored the news wires and other media consisted of just six people. The production group was the largest, followed by the features and reviews subgroup. All of the staff, and many volunteers, belong to more than one subgroup, so for example, Andrew was also part of the News group; and Gerald was also a part of the features and reviews group. Xtra, the relatively new second publication, is written by a separate team, but produced and laid-out with assistance from the other production groups.

As with any regularized publication, there is a cyclical nature to the work activity. The production cycle is second nature to everyone and only occasionally do workers have to refer to the large master

schedule posted on the wall in the lounge. There are three cycles per month: one for The Body Politic and two for Xtra. The cycles are standardized with each stage having interdependent deadlines. The first stage has to do with the content of the newspapers. Some articles are commissioned following a collective decision, but most are decided upon and edited by the Midmag section. Writers and contributors are often working months in advance of a publication date, although regular features and columns may be ground out only a few hours before typesetting. As soon as copy is ready, it is typed into the typesetter and then it goes for proofing to anyone who has a few minutes. Everybody hates proofreading and everybody does it - everything must be read by three people before going to layout. It is a testament to the underlying co-operative nature of getting the work done that this job gets done with relative ease. Layout and production uses many volunteers and this work is often done at night. Meanwhile, the cover is being designed and the advertisements are being sorted and sent for word processing. Once a final layout is ready, checked and double checked, it goes to an external printer. During this period, which takes a couple of days, the office quiets down. People take a much needed break and start winding down from the hectic pace, but only to wind up again for the next cycle. Distribution is the last stage and is handled mainly by volunteers, working at night or on the weekend. TBP's decentralized approach to work organization appears to provide a fairly high level of efficiency and co-operation. Decisions taken in the past regarding job allocation and work routines appear to have been good ones for the organization. In all of my conversations with staff and

volunteers, there was never any suggestion that the work routines should be altered in any significant way. Some members talk of minor changes in specific activities, but everyone seems clear that the established work methods serve the organization well.

Although the process of getting the work done is highly organized and quite efficient, it is not without its problems. As will become apparent shortly when I discuss decision making, some workers feel that subgroups are too autonomous and operate without sufficient reference to the whole - that they have become worlds onto themselves. The interdependence of those who write and prepare articles and those who those who typeset and lay out articles, has inherent within it the possibility for conflict. Gillian's group in the features section sometimes finds the production people insensitive to the problems they are having with tardy writers, and the production people occasionally suggest that the features group are not on as tight a time-frame as they might be. Although these tensions occasionally become manifest at the production level, they more often than not reflect issues to do with influence and decision making more generally.

4.5 Decision Making, Conflict and Integration

Decision making at TBP occurs at three levels. In the course of their work, individuals make decisions about their day to day work activities; the subgroups make decisions relative to the area they co-ordinate; and the twice monthly collective meeting debates matters with policy and legal implications. The boundaries between these spheres of decision making are often fairly straightforward. In the average course

of a day, week or month, many decisions get made without going beyond the subgroups. This appears to work well for the organization, as everything would be brought to a halt if all matters had to be debated and decided upon by the entire collective. Most people report that the subgroups operate amicably and efficiently. The bi-weekly collective meeting is the primary forum for making decisions that have significant policy implications for the organization. Final decisions regarding editorial content, approval for feature articles, responses to letters from readers, major financial decisions, personnel policy, and future planning are typical of the issues that are supposed to come before the collective as a whole. Collective meetings are held in the evening and include all members of the collective and are open to anyone associated with the organization. In many ways, the meetings function quite efficiently. The tasks of chairing the meetings and acting as secretary rotate, and these tasks are usually handled professionally. For every meeting there is an agenda, and items have a time-needed estimate. In some cases, a report has been prepared to facilitate debate on specific items. The meeting may begin with a few announcements about upcoming events in the gay community, or points of general interest to the group, but an effort is made to limit those items coming before the collective meeting to ones that genuinely have policy or financial implications for the organization.

In some matters, though, the jurisdiction for decision making is unclear, and individuals and groups appear to overlook or ignore the established channels. In some cases, these boundaries are overlooked because decisions have to be made quickly and it can be difficult to get

everyone together for debate and still meet the publishing deadlines. In these cases, debate is often confined to those members that can be contacted on site or by telephone. In the early days of the organization, the need for quick decision making was probably facilitated by the fact of the 'kitchen collective', but subsequent growth in staff and volunteers has meant that not everyone who has been part of the formal decision making process can be consulted. Most members of the organization recognize and accept that some issues will surface unexpectedly and that decisions will of necessity be taken without full debate or consultation.

There are some important decisions which are made by individuals, subgroups and coalitions without reference to the overall collective - decisions that do not necessarily have to be made quickly and which have far reaching policy or legal implications for the enterprise. Andrew, for example, talks at length about the enormous latitude which individuals can acquire. In a hushed tone, using the term 'editorial position' to describe the work areas that Ken and Gillian co-ordinate, he says:

> The editorial positions carry more prestige - Ken more than Gillian, I mean. The position - the work they do - means they are more in the forefront of things. Their work means that they have a lot of personal discretion. It there was something they wanted to do, they might not bring it to the collective. I've seen Ken act with total self-interest. For example, if a news item came in through the wire and it was something we would normally publish and Ken didn't want to - he just wouldn't bring it up at the collective, or he would just stall it long enough that it got buried. He gets stuff published in the same way - without bringing it to collective.

Andrew posits that the collective, as the main policy making body, should require more reports, especially from the influential news group

(Ken's area) and the features section (Gillian's area).

> The collective gets bogged down in other things - things that really don't matter all that much. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that Ken would see such things [reports] as collective interference and no one really wants to confront Ken. He tends to predefine a lot of what the collective should get involved in and the collective seems to accept his judgement.

On the ideal role for the collective, Andrew suggests that 'the collective should know what is going on and know about what is going to be published before it appears in print', but offers no clear strategy about how this might be accomplished.

Andrew is not alone in thinking that the Canadian news subgroup, co-ordinated by Ken, operates with too much assumed autonomy. David, Tim and others also see this group as failing to bring important issues to the collective. On the surface, gathering news from throughout Canada is a relatively routine job, and in theory without much inherent controversy. Potential stories are picked-up from both the regular and alternative media by Ken's group, and volunteers across the country report on local stories of interest to the gay community in general. In any given month, for example, a story might surface about an individual who is confronting discrimination in the military or education system; there may be an important legal precedent being set in a Canadian courtroom; one of the provincial human rights boards might have agreed to take on a case involving a gay person; or, at the local level, there might be news about regional groups involved in gay liberation. The mandate of Ken's group is to gather news of these stories and write them up for publication. The problem, however, emerges around decisions that Ken and his group make regarding not only what to publish, but also about how the story will be presented and what themes will be

highlighted. The amount of discretion involved is actually quite high, and it is up to Ken's group to decide when items should be forwarded to the collective for debate and approval. Tim comments:

> I often do not know what news stories will appear in the magazine until I read it, and by then it is too late to do anything if I disagree with the way in which the item has been presented. I have been quite angry lately about the way the news group has been handling news stories about AIDS. Ken's personal view about AIDS is that it should in no way restrict the sexual freedom of gays - obviously, there are other views. Funny thing though, all the news stories seem to me to be biased towards Ken's view of the problem.
>
> It is not that I feel everything should be brought to the collective - that would be grossly inefficient and unnecessary. My problem - and I think lots of others have this same problem - is that Ken's group, over the years, has brought less and less to the collective. At this point in time, we almost never debate a news story. Who's fault is this? On the one hand, you could say it is the fault of the collective, but on the other hand, I think it is really the fault of Ken. At some point, he seems to have decided that he knows best and that collective decision making is unnecessary. This is compounded by the fact that Ken currently does not even attend meetings and very few people want to come face to face with Ken's anger. We don't have the mechanisms for dealing with people who decide independently that they are going to hold the collective process at ransom - as I said earlier, it can only survive within a spirit of trust and commitment. When the trust involved in delegation is broken, no one knows quite what to do. The situation with Ken and the Canadian news group has never been addressed at our meetings, even though people talk a great deal about it outside of meetings.

Some organizational members also feel that the subgroup co-ordinated by Gillian, which is responsible for features, reviews and major articles, also operates with too much autonomy. Gillian is perhaps more sensitive to this problem than Ken and expresses confusion concerning what should go to the collective. As a guideline, she says,

> Our group would take anything to the collective that we thought was problematic or legally a bit fuzzy. We would also try to generate a full debate on any items that we thought might offend or shock readers. In theory we plan feature articles well in advance, but in practice we are often working with a tight deadline. What we do is post a tentative schedule of the articles and stories we will feature. As you can see [pointing to the wall], we have scheduled a story on parents of gays for May, a story on circumcision rites

> in various cultures for June, a book review on Sue Golding's new book for April, and so on. Also, we now have a subgroup within our group that is entirely concerned with features and articles about AIDS. In my view, other members of the organization have some obligation to take a look at our publication list - after all it is posted for anyone to see. Some of the complaints you will hear about people not knowing what is going into the magazine reflects the fact that they have not taken the time to find out.

The difficulty in finding a balance between the appropriate level of subgroup autonomy and collective decision making is problematic. Tim's view that it all boils down to trust and commitment to the principle of group decision making is echoed by others, but these are intangibles that are often noticed by their absence, and members of the organization appear to have little to offer about how to recover these qualities once they are weakened or lost. As I have mentioned before, these sorts of tensions have been with TBP for a long time and have their roots in the early history and evolution of the group. Some members would like change and in fact one very active volunteer left the group while I was on site, indicating to me that he felt the conflict over decision making would never be resolved and that he was too frustrated to continue. For most members, though, the line between individual, subgroup and collective decision making is acknowledged as fuzzy and sometimes over-stepped. As Gerald said on a couple of occasions, 'It is the way it is at TBP'.

The question of influence touches not only on the issue of subgroup autonomy, but on the relationship between paid staff and the collective as a whole. Both Tim and David detect role confusion between volunteer and staff members of the collective. Tim sees this as a recent phenomenon at TBP, whereas David says he noticed it right from the beginning when he joined two years ago. Tim says that in recent years

he has observed a tendency on the part of staff members to bring their day-to-day working problems to the collective for resolution - problems such as how to evaluate each other's work, issues to do with training, complaints about wages and working hours. In some cases, Tim suggests, individual staff members do not raise these problems directly, but convince a volunteer member of the collective to raise the issue on their behalf. I asked Tim where he would draw a line between what the collective should deal with and what the staff group should handle on their own. In the past, he said, staff somehow always found a way to resolve problems on their own, so it was virtually never an issue, adding, 'I don't like being put in the position of boss or mediator'.

David shares some of Tim's confusion about the role of the staff group versus the overall collective and says,

> The staff sometimes seem to view the collective as their boss, which is a bit strange given they are all part of the collective themselves. It must surely speak to problems they have in managing themselves.

He suggest that, at least ideally,

> there needs to be more practiced routines for opening up disagreement, conflict and reflection [in the staff group and in the collective]. We need to talk more about the issues that the paper is about. [This conflict] could be solved with adequate reporting and reflection; there needs to be constant re-evaluation of the process and of the inequality. You constantly have to think of ways to let the weaker have a voice. It ought to be fair game to criticize each other, to create an atmosphere in which it is ok to say if you think there is a problem.

Nevertheless, David has contradictory feelings about the practicality of this view, and tempers the above comment with what he calls a 'realistic' perspective on the nature of people and on the nature of TBP.

All of what I've said may be irrelevant in practice - it is very

> difficult for people to be honest with each other. Dealing with conflict taps a real fear on the part of people because you are tapping characteristics that may well be central to their personality. Civilized society depends upon some restraint, but this has been carried too far here. Here, a crisis has to happen before anything gets done.

Tim has difficulty in separating conflict between paid staff and volunteers from conflict in the organization more generally and, like David, suggests that there is a 'human' dimension to these problems that can make 'rational' solutions seem naive. Reflecting on the general issue of conflict, Tim said that he believes that because so much of the conflict he observes (whatever the source or manifestation) is 'social and subtle', it is easier 'to keep a lid on it' than to open it up. He believes that TBP has always had a problem in dealing with conflict and suggests that finding a solution would require 'an investigation of the culture' and that few if any people are ready for such an undertaking.

David and Tim agree that the paid staff have access to much more information than volunteers and can control and manipulate this information in ways that give them power - power that can be used positively or negatively. Both Tim and David feel that the entire collective process depends on curbing these self-serving tendencies - what David calls 'the oligarchical tendency' - and that such an organization can only function and survive if everyone's co-operative instincts are operative.

Other volunteer members of the collective echo many of the themes expressed by David and Tim. Some have different opinions about the causes and solutions, but all seem to agree that power and influence is disproportionate and that unresolved conflict is a hallmark of the organization. Many also wonder out loud how long the organization can

continue to function on the basis of paid staff working such long hours for low pay.

Perhaps more than any other person in the organization, Ken is often at the centre of tension between the paid staff and the collective, and often figures in situations of conflict more generally. One example that took place while I was visiting the group is illustrative. As a form of 'confrontation' with the organization, Ken arbitrarily decided that he no longer wanted to be a member of the collective, and forfeited his 'right' to be part of that decision making forum. He explained his behaviour to me by saying he felt it was time that someone caused a 'kerfufle' and 'challenged the established order'. He also reported that his decision was influenced by his growing dissatisfaction with the number of hours he was expected to work. He said that he thought his refusal to attend collective meetings was a clear statement about the fact that his contracted hours were already being used in routine job activities.

Ken's withdrawal from the collective did spark a debate: some workers humorously suggested that it was a bit more pleasant not to have Ken around at meetings, but most people interpreted it as childish behaviour, or incompatible with the principle and spirit of collective organization. Nonetheless, Ken's actions brought to the surface some of the tension to do with the relationship between staff and the rest of the collective, and got people talking about how they deal with conflict.

In exploring further this situation with Ken, he told me that 'it was all designed to fire debate. Obviously, it worked'. Ken reported

feeling that the collective had never come to terms with conflict and that he was sick and tired of 'pushing it under the carpet'.

> The collective refused to develop experience for dealing with conflict. Originally it was a happy body of people - very tolerant of differences of opinion. Over the years that has changed remarkably. There is more open intolerance [speaking of himself]. One of the problems is, when people start behaving badly, from a democratic point of view, the collective seems to ignore it and let them do whatever damage they may do because it doesn't want to face up to saying 'look, this can't be permitted, stop doing that'. That's been a bad element that has developed in our culture - turning a blind eye to bad behaviour. Every so often, someone [again, talking about himself] has to do something so drastic that the collective cannot ignore it.

I asked Ken what sort of bad behaviour, besides his own, the collective had difficulty in confronting, and he used an example from the past in which a staff member was perceived as not pulling her weight. He said that the consensus was that she was only working twenty hours a week, but that the situation was never addressed and that everyone just 'drifted' along. He said that the collective had never developed skills for dealing with that sort of thing. Finally, the person decided to leave, but in Ken's view, only after several years of ill will and a refusal on the part of everyone to confront the situation. Recalling another example, Ken talked about a staff member who had been the co-ordinator of the features and reviews section, a person who most others felt was incompetent and responsible for some very poor articles in the magazine. With a air of disdain, he remembers how the person finally left the organization:

> For reasons I cannot fathom, he asked for a vote of confidence at a collective meeting and didn't get a single vote, and that's how we got rid of him. The funny thing was he got rid of himself. He cut his own head off. It should never have come to that, but dealing with him would have meant we had to confront issues around evaluation and failure and almost everyone would avoid that at all costs. Our problem has always been in dealing with people who

> can't take 'the hints'. There have been all sorts of questions around workload and relationships over the years. There are a lot of different theories [here] about how people should relate and monitor each other - these different opinions are a source of conflict.

As a solution to the problems, Ken suggests with obvious feelings of ambivalence:

> In my worse moments I think there should be a written constitution, but that would be a disaster because it would let loose the constitutionalist in everyone and we would probably end up having arguments over the interpretation of the constitution rather than about the issue at hand. On the other hand, we have an entirely 'oral constitution', and there are just as many interpretations.

Both Tim and David deplore Ken's decision to withdraw from the collective, but find themselves agreeing with some of his observations to do with conflict at TBP, albeit they frame their opinions in more analytical and intellectual terms. They both suggest that conflict is one of the inevitable outcomes of an organization such as TBP, both because it has a large and diverse membership, and because it attracts people who feel passionately and intimately connected with the politics of gay liberation. Both of them suggest that they have had enough involvement in political movements to realize that finding an ideological consensus is never easy. In addition to the conflict they see as inevitable in a developing political movement, they both agree that conflict at TBP can also be traced to the fact that some people do not like each other, even though they have agreed to come together for a common purpose. Tim cites an example of strained interpersonal relationships between himself and one of the paid staff. He is reluctant to 'name names', but says 'you have probably guessed anyway - it's Ken'. He says that Ken can be 'as cold as a fish' and that Ken's abrasive style almost always rubs him the wrong way. In the same

breath, Tim also admits that Ken has a brilliant mind and is a very hard worker.

As we have seen, to be part of TBP it is necessary to support the concept of gay liberation. As Tim and David point out, though, a great deal of conflict at TBP has traditionally arisen out of the various political perspectives that individuals believe will help to achieve the goal of gay liberation. Debate occurs about what gay liberation actually means, and about the degree to which that equality is contingent upon wider or more sustained social change. For some, gay equality is linked to larger socio-economic imbalance; to some it is essentially about sexual liberation and experimentation. Ken goes so far as to say he rejects what he views as, 'left-wing fundamentalism'. To him, the oppression of gay people would be as pervasive under a right-wing or left-wing state, and his views typify one side of an argument calling for the publications to contain more erotic material in order to what he calls, 'liberate fantasy and release sexual inhibitions'. In Ken's opinion the publications should be on the forefront of legitimizing more open access to pornography and other erotic materials. Others take a different view, and see the magazine, at the very least, providing both sides of the argument.

As well, in 1986, there is debate over gender issues. TBP has never quite known how to reconcile the often quite different concerns and backgrounds of gay men and lesbians, even though a few women have traditionally been part of the collective. Tim comments:

> TBP began as a 'male' organization, and in the gay community the male segment is more affluent and organized. The extent to which females could move in has been limited. There have always been efforts to increase the number of women involved, but that butts

against fears about how men and women relate, and also brings into question how much the paper could and would change to accommodate the voices of lesbians.

Debate to do with political orientation and editorial policy can become intense, and a casual observer might think that people were bitter enemies. This is not always the case. Members have alliances and strongly-held views, and people involved with the enterprise are routinely expected to have a point of view, but differences are often respected and no particular party line dominates - a characteristic reflected in the sometimes inconsistent editorials. Occasionally, differences do erupt in an acrimonious way, but closer observation can usually reveal that these outbursts are equally linked to personality conflicts. Two examples from my visits to the organization illustrate the extent of political conflict within the organization, and the often diffuse and compromising way in which decisions are made. The first example revolved around a controversial classified advertisement; the second, about a debate concerning the nature of pornography.

In February, The Body Politic carried more than two hundred classified advertisements. They had arrived over the previous weeks and had been processed by one volunteer and one staff person. Along with ads for homes, travel, business opportunities and political groups, there were classified ads placed by individuals seeking partners for social and sexual purposes. One of these ads read as follows:

> Handsome, successful, GWM [gay, white, male] would like young, well built BM [black man] for houseboy. Ideal for student or young businessman. Some travelling and affection required. Reply with letter, photo, phone number to...

The person opening the envelop separated the ad from the rest and, seeking guidance, showed it to several people that were around at the

time. Some said it was acceptable; others disliked it but felt it might be published. A gay man of colour who happened to be around said it should not be allowed to run. Everyone who saw the ad realized that it might raise some objections, but felt that the policy regarding classified ads did not provide sufficient reasons for its exclusion.

Because the contentious ad was not clearly disallowed by the existing policy, and because the full collective was not due to meet until after the February issue went to press, the people responsible for approving classified ads decided to run it as it stood. From then on, protest grew. Not only did the ad initiate an active discussion informally, it brought into action one of the peculiarities of decision making at TBP - what people refer to as 'the flurry of memos'.

As soon as the magazine became available, memos about the ad began appearing in everyone's box, some of them posted on the bulletin board for general consideration. By the time of the next collective meeting, as a result, many people had expressed their views in writing and little coalitions had formed around particular perspectives. Before long, the ad had become a vehicle for a major internal debate on racism, the role of the magazine and even the nature of gay liberation itself.

What people chose to write and say around this issue, provides a glimpse into the polemics and differences of opinion that can frequently make decision making and consensus-reaching such difficult and often unresolved processes at TBP. Ken began his memo by revealing that he had been participating in sado-masochistic sex for some time, and was opposed to anything that curbed a person's right to express openly their sexual fantasies. Justifying the running of the ad, Ken writes:

> The writer of the classified ad has a sexual fantasy of which an element is a black houseboy. The fact that historically black people have been relegated to the role of servants and slaves is, I agree, very relevant. It is precisely that historical fact and its present cultural reverberations that make this fantasy possible. Once we condemn the desire, we no longer seek to explain it, we have thrown away a crucial key to understanding the social forces and contradictions which give rise to it.

Tim's memo responds directly to Ken's.

> In his memo, Ken proposes that what TBP is all about is the 'inviolability of desire'. I want to strongly disagree. I feel that has not been true in the past and should not be true in the future. Our masthead does not read 'a magazine for the inviolability of desire'. It says, 'a magazine for gay liberation'. There is a huge difference between the two, and I believe that the attempt to conflate them seeks to replace the rich and complex politics which our movement and this paper have developed for the last decade and a half with a narrow and short-sighted libertarianism. What TBP is about is gay liberation. That means we must respect all sectors of our community and see to it that the 'desire' of dominant sectors does not run roughshod over the sensitivities of others and contribute to further fragmentation and division.

Gerald, in his usual fashion, appealed for tolerance and education in his memo.

> I would like not only to accept this ad as it is, but remove what restrictions we presently put on ads. Accept people saying 'no blacks'. Accept 'no fats or fems'. Then find some way, editorially, of making people aware of what they're doing in the ads, particularly if they're doing it mindlessly.

A second flurry of memos responded to the first round, and by this time most people had aligned themselves with one or another side. Many opposed Gerald's suggestion, typified by responses from Tim and Rick.

> Tim: Gerald's solution to this embarrassing position - no restriction whatsoever - abandons all pretense that we somehow oppose racism and that we know what it is.

> Rick: Is anybody here really arguing that this ad is not racist? I find that hard to understand. The ad is making a distinction based on race, and is as clearly racist as the ad that says 'straight-looking man seeks same' is homophobic. Now even if we had no politics at all about race, we'd be opposed to homophobia. Why do we still run ads like this?

The collective meeting of February 5th did not go well. The proliferation of memos ensured that positions had been taken and alliances formed before the meeting. Those who favoured the ad had not changed their minds and those who were opposed were equally steadfast in their views. No decision was taken about whether to run the ad in the next issue. Memos continued to fly until the meeting of February 25th, when a decision had to be made about whether to run the ad in the April edition (the person running the ad had paid for several runs). A consensus could not be reached and a decision was taken, against the will of some, to put the issue to a vote. The vote favoured not running the ad. A second vote was taken concerning a proposal to formally apologize for running the ad in the first place, but in this case only a minority felt an apology would be useful or appropriate and the motion was defeated. Interestingly, and in keeping with TBP's philosophy of airing internal strife in the magazine, a full report (with extensive excerpts from the memos) was made in the April edition of The Body Politic.

The example not only helps to illustrate the way that individual actors express their views, but also provides a sense of the intensity with which people become attached to their opinions on matters that evoke debate about the role and purpose of the organization. It was not long after this particular debate had cooled-down that Ken withdrew from the collective, ostensibly because of his dissatisfaction with the workload and his unwillingness to work extra hours. As Gerald wondered in conversation, though, was part of Ken's behaviour designed to punish the collective for not agreeing with his views? And, one wonders, would

it be likely in the future that Ken would take a news story with similar controversial elements to the collective?

Another story, this time about a debate to do with pornography, also illustrates the way that decision making at TBP can take place, and the way in which strong wills come up against one another (although not as strongly in this example). As with the 'houseboy' ad, this story demonstrates the willingness of TBP to take on extremely controversial issues (after all, remember there were to be no 'sacred cows'), but at the same time, how the resolution of these issues can have the power to work against consensual group decision making.

In May, Canada Customs opened a parcel that had arrived from the United States and addressed to The Body Politic in Toronto. This event was not unusual, because parcels and mail from other countries with a Body Politic address were routinely opened by Custom's agents. This parcel, however, contained several videos for review by the organization - videos depicting lesbians dressed in leather and performing a number of sexual acts. The videos were seized and declared pornographic.

Debate about the course of action that TBP should take began almost immediately. Some members felt that there were more important issues than this to occupy everyone's time and energy, while other people wanted to turn all of their attention to a fight with Canada Customs. As with the houseboy ad, a flurry of memos initiated the debate. In these memos, the issue got variously constructed as 'a women's issue', a debate about pornography, a debate about the power of the state, and, to one writer, 'an issue not worth fighting at this time'. Agreement was reached informally (that is, outside the collective meeting), that the

first step was to obtain a contraband copy of the video, and a couple of women members drove to the United States, entered a video store and bought a copy of the tape. Smiling once they had recrossed the border without being searched, they rushed back to Toronto and set up a screening that evening.

After this viewing, opinion was even more divided. Some felt that the magazine should publish a story about the incident which would include 'stills' from the video. Others felt that publishing stills would almost certainly bring forth the police, and others wanted to drop the issue altogether, seeking to focus the debate, and any article to be published, around pornography more generally. When I went into the office the next day, several people made a point of telling me their views, wondering if I would support their position. One woman felt so strongly that she prepared a four page memo downplaying the consequences of criminal action, arguing that it could be defended as a 'news story'. By the time the collective meeting took place, nearly everyone had already been involved in the debate. At the meeting, speakers reiterated the points they had already made in memos and conversations, and Gillian made a particularly impassioned comment about the fact that TBP had never really fought a major issue involving women. A decision was taken to run a story on the video seizure, minus the stills. Predictably, some members were unhappy with the decision and reported feeling that the organization had at best reached a compromise rather than tackle the issue of pornography. Some even took the outcome to be indicative of a shift in editorial orientation. Ken for example, referencing both the houseboy and video issue, wrote in a subsequent

memo:

> The paper held together for years because of a spirit of tolerance in the collective, in which people were encouraged to think or write anything, and the pages of the Body Politic were considered a forum for debate. That spirit has changed though. For the last year or so, I think some people in the collective saw their roles as preventing things from being published.

There are a couple of interesting observations that can be taken from these two examples. The first is that nearly anyone who wanted to be involved could, in fact, have a say - there were no restrictions about who could write a memo or who could state an opinion or who could join a coalition. The second observation is that the divisions between some positions and personalities on these sorts of issues can run very deep. What the examples reinforce is that TBP has been and continues to be an organization that courts, creates and seems to prosper on controversy. It is a double edged sword, though, because these same issues that nourish on the one hand, separate people on the other. This is a paradox and a dilemma that would appear to have no obvious solution at TBP. To quote Gerald once again, 'It is the way it is at TBP'.

4.6 Where are we going?

By 1986, TBP seemed to have two levels of reality - a sense of life as normal and a sense of life as completely unsettled. Superimposed on debates to do with what would appear in print and what editorial orientation the group would follow, and superimposed on the relatively stable work routines, was a less articulated debate about the future of the organization. The most obvious symptoms of this debate were concerns being raised about work habits and dedication to the organization. Less obviously symptomatic was the absence of debate

taking place about looming financial problems and the reluctance to proceed with something the collective had agreed to do nearly a year before my visits - the so called 'organizational review'.

Finances had always been tight at TBP. Without low wages and massive volunteer support, the organization would never have survived. Few people even wanted to know about the financial situation: most people were on site for social and political agendas, and somehow sufficient money had always materialized. Gerald, who officially kept tabs on the finances, was much more a skilled writer than an administrator. The financial area was a part of the business that the group had never prioritized and had never made the subject of specialized recruitment.

At collective meetings in the winter of 1986, a budget report was not presented and Gerald reassured the group that it would be forthcoming, and probably not as bad as some expected. There was some tension around this since several people, such as David, were trying to predict the financial impact of three recent changes: a new typesetter had recently been purchased; subscriptions were down and not being renewed; and expenses were up in response to inflation.

Although most people wondered if Gerald's reassurances were based in fact, there was a laissez-faire attitude - finances had always been grim and there were other important matters to attend to. Gerald himself provided some insight into the source of this attitude:

> For a long time we thought it was a virtue that we didn't know how money worked. It was partly the product of the ideology that we grew out of - the late 60's and early 70's counter culture.

He added:

> We've always kept very informal books, without adhering to any recognized accounting principles. It was mostly cash flow sheets.

Finally, at a collective meeting in the Spring, Gerald had a budget report: TBP was about to go under; drastic action had to be taken.

Nevertheless, there was no sense of panic. That there was a money crisis was not new to people at TBP, and many members felt that it could be overcome as it had in the past. A letter went out to sustainers appealing for funds, and Lee's announcement that she would be leaving in the fall to return to university was followed by a decision not to replace her with a paid staff member - everyone would just have to do more and new volunteers would have to be found to fill in the gaps.

By this time, what workers were interpreting as a more important and disturbing crisis was a problem with constituents. Readership was declining; subscriptions were not being renewed; letters to the editor were bombastic; and there was new and threatening competition for the gay market. It was becoming increasingly apparent to everyone that they were competing with a movement TBP had helped spawn.

Perhaps it is not surprising. then, that in addition to the conflict that debate about the sorts of items that would be published often produced, collective meetings during the latter period of my research seemed tense for other reasons as well. Much of this tension focused around the negotiation process to do with what would be the parameters for a previously agreed upon organizational review.

In 1985, the collective agreed to undertake a review of its operations. This review was planned to include a week-end retreat at a farm, in which the long-term mission and goals would be debated, and an

on-site debate over the course of several months, in which the functioning of each subgroup's activities and future plans would be scrutinized. A year later none of these activities had taken place, even though the topic of an organizational review had found a permanent place on meeting agendas. The review, it seemed, was active only insofar as it was an 'item', but completely inactive insofar as it was an tangible activity. At one meeting, a worker typified what was becoming a dominant view by suggesting, 'if anyone mentions this review thing again, I'm going to be sick'. Nonetheless, some members felt that some kind of review process was critical to the future success of the organization, especially in light of the financial problems and the changes in the 'gay' market. But even those supporting the idea seemed ambivalent, wondering at the same time if it was too late or even worthwhile. Rickie typified this view, telling me after a particularly uncivilized meeting:

> I'm really at a loss to know what TBP stands for anymore and we need this assessment to help regain some clarity. At the same time, I'm beginning to think that the paper was a product of a historical moment which ended long ago. Do we need a 'review' to tell us the obvious?

The most hopeful signs to do with finances and future directions seemed to be Xtra. It had found a market and lots of commercial advertisers, although it was not nearly enough to support the staff and pay the rent and other bills for the whole organization. As well, some people within the organization were ideologically and politically uncommitted to the light, frothy, enthusiastic style of Xtra.

In the late summer of 1986, Gerald informed the group that TBP was $30,000 in debt. By December, though, a repayment schedule had been

worked out that was based on donations that had been promised by sustainers, forthcoming changes in the staff complement, and a decision to 'rent' the new machinery to several free-lance typesetters in the city.

Shortly after Lee announced she was leaving, Andrew and Robyn announced similar plans - Robyn indicated that she wanted to begin free-lance work in production and design, and Andrew said he had decided to enrol at the University of Toronto for a degree in Political Science. Still, uncertainty permeated the air - could the existing crew manage with three less paid staff? Especially since the remaining staff, Ken, Gerald and Dale, were already feeling overworked and less willing to work the requisite fifty to sixty hour work week. Would there be sufficient demand to rent the equipment at the non-peak times it would be available? And, what about the organizational review?

I was not at the collective meeting in December 1986, but the reports I received suggested to me that it was without enormous tension or conflict. It was nearly Christmas, traditionally a sad time for many gay people given their often strained relationships with family. Perhaps with sadness for other reasons as well, the group of people attending the meeting made a difficult decision. They decided to continue Xtra, a job that could be undertaken with less staff, but to discontinue The Body Politic. The magazine that had been such an integral part of so many people's lives would be no more.

It is ironic and perhaps fitting that The Body Politic ceased publication in February 1987 with the issue following the 15th anniversary special edition. Only a month before, the Ontario

Government had passed legislation to include sexual orientation in the Human Rights Code. Maintaining its tradition of sharing its ups and downs with readers, the collective put together a long article in the final edition that attempted to chronicle and analyse what had happened.

> Throughout this crisis we all knew the financial difficulties we faced coincided with and in some ways resulted from deeper problems. We had already been talking about major change before the onset of the crisis, and had raised questions about the kinds of things we write about, the kinds of communities we write for, and the ways we organize around here.
>
> A dilemma quite typical of collectives such as ours, particularly mature ones, is that newcomers are insufficiently integrated. The older members of the Collective share a history and a commitment to the enterprise that is hard to expect of new arrivals. Differences in background, in perspective, and in influence should be confronted as issues, but often are not.
>
> The magazine was born as a vehicle for radical ideas about social change, and even if its voice has become more ill-defined and varied over the years, it continues to represent a progressive viewpoint that sees political change as a central concern of the gay community. But in the 1980's more than in the two decades before, many lesbians and gay men see themselves as quite removed from that perspective. Many gay people feel that we have arrived - that we have gained enough social acceptance to live our lives in a way that is qualitatively better than it was a decade or two ago. [To many] the continuing reference to extensive political agendas seems tedious and irrelevant. To those for whom life is not rosy, problems of unemployment and housing are more pressing.
>
> Organizations, like people, age, and they are often not good at reconsidering the way they do things to reflect the different stages of their growth. The crisis we are in has forced us to do precisely that, and it will take some time before we know whether we confront maturity more successfully than most people.

4.7 Update

By the Spring of 1989, there is no longer an organization called The Body Politic. There is, however, an organization that some people refer to as 'The Body Politic 2', occasionally making the '2' sound like 'too'. In spite of this nostalgic reference, though, this organization

bears little resemblance to The Body Politic organization I have described in this essay. It is in a different physical location, has different goals, different people, and a very different organizational structure and philosophy. Like a phoenix rising out of the ashes, a new organization has been born.

This organization publishes a twice-monthly newspaper called Xtra, which is a direct descendent of the Xtra that used to be published by TBP. Indicative and perhaps symbolic of the fact that the enterprise has a new and different purpose and spirit, though, is the publication's masthead which reads, 'your FREE gay guide to Toronto'. Even more evidence of the fact that this is a quite different organization can be obtained by reading the publication information. Here, one will notice that there is no reference to a 'collective', but rather to a 'board of directors'. Here as well, one will notice that the organization has a 'publisher and editor' and an 'assistant editor', along with 'managers' for the three areas of production, business and office. Perhaps most startling of all, one will notice that the enterprise reports it has a circulation of 18,000.

Evidence of the roots and history of the organization, however, are also obvious in a review of the publication information. Ken is a staff member and is officially designated the publisher and editor. Both Gerald and Rickie are on the board of directors, but do not work directly for the organization. Also on the list of contributors are many names of volunteer workers. But other than Ken, not a single name in the list of workers and contributors is the same as those that appeared in the publication data for the final edition of The Body Politic.

To understand the organization that produces Xtra, one would certainly have to understand its history, and that history is inextricably interwoven with the TBP. Like the human family, the parents are part of the child, but to understand the child as an adolescent or adult, one would have to approach the offspring on its own terms. And so it would be with what has become an offshoot of The Body Politic family. To understand the organization that produces Xtra we would need to go inside and explore it on its own terms - and that, exciting as it would no doubt be, is beyond the bounds of this research project.

CHAPTER 5

STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT BOOKROOM (SCM)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers SCM, a worker-managed bookstore located in Toronto, Canada, which specializes in alternative books, journals and magazines. The main thrust of the store's collection is in the areas of philosophy, political science, education and women's studies.

Interestingly, the precise location of the store is an important aspect to the organization's story. It is located in an increasingly popular business section of the city: the intersection of Bloor and St. George Streets. To the east of St. George, Bloor Street has some of the most expensive commercial shops and residential housing in the city. To the west of St. George, Bloor Street becomes more counter-cultural with health food shops and vegetarian restaurants, but also with an increasing number of coffee and wine bars which speak to the changing face of the neighborhood. This part of Toronto marks one of the last bastions of the hippy and the new territory of the Yuppy. Immediately to the south is the main campus of the University of Toronto, Canada's largest university and a source of many book buyers.

In spite of its location, and unusually for a bookstore, you have to look very carefully to find SCM. It is on the ground floor of a high-rise building without benefit of a store front. Its doorway is a small opening in the bleak concrete at one end of a 1960's building. There is a glass case full of books located on a concrete pedestal on

the sidewalk with a discrete sign, but it would be very easy to walk past the store and never know you had passed a bookshop. As will become apparent in this essay, the fact that SCM is in the middle, physically and commercially, of this diverse and changing social and commercial environment, combined with the fact that it is hard to find, are important first clues to understanding both the past and present of SCM.

Once you find the store, and once you are inside, it feels like a retreat from the increasingly competitive and franchised world at its doorstep. Inside the store is a friendly, harmonious group of people who appear to have negotiated a warm, peaceful and welcoming environment. Mozart, Beethoven or possibly Stravinsky are the first sounds one hears, and a quick visual survey of the place suggests contented-looking customers lingering over books, journals and magazines. There seems to be no rush or pressure to buy. Staff members are present, and available if you need them, but for the most part they are only noticeable as quietly going about their business - one may be sitting at the cash register reading a book, and another might be taking inventory.

At the same time, though, at least to a questioning observer, SCM feels almost too good to be true. One wonders: how has a little bookstore that one enters through a cave-like opening in a concrete wall, with an esoteric stocklist and no pressure to buy, survived? Especially, one wonders, in a city that some business observers have characterized as among the most competitive and cut-throat book markets in North America.

Over the course of three weeks in the winter of 1986 I tried to

find some answers to the above questions. This case study, then, is not presented as a deep ethnography, but rather as a descriptive overview of an worker-managed organization. The essay to follow considers the organization with particular reference to the factors that appear to account for SCM's peaceful and co-operative culture - a culture and organizational form, it will become clear, that has been very difficult to sustain in the highly competitive business environment in which it has recently found itself. As part of my research, I attended a couple of workers' meetings, had a group interview with six members of the staff, informally chatted with staff and observed people going about their day-to-day activities.

5.2 The Setting

SCM is quite a small store, with books taking up nearly every square inch of the two rooms on the main floor and the one room in the basement. A modern computerized cash register is positioned as close as you can get to the doorway without completely obstructing traffic. Nearby, at the front of the store, are popular books that sell quickly - contemporary fiction, biography, literature, as well as new books from any category. The next section contains alternative newspapers, periodicals and journals - items that attract customers but do not sell very well. Behind these two high profile sections are large bookshelves with titles such as labour movement, political science, psychology, sociology, co-operatives, women's studies, gay studies, education, Marxism and communism. Religious and philosophy sections are in the basement. At the back of the store is a separate room that is extremely

crowded although without a sense of chaos or disorder. As one worker remarked, 'pretty well everything that isn't a book or customer is in this room!' The room, which is about fifteen feet by fifteen feet, has file cabinets, a computer, shelves of file boxes, a cork board full of notices and invoices, and is dominated by a large round table in the centre. This is the business office, the staff lounge, the meeting room and the focal point for administrative jobs.

The first hint of SCM's roots are in its name. It was begun in the early seventies by a group associated with the Student Christian Movement. In 1975 two factions formed - one group who wanted to be highly commercial and another group who wanted to be a truly alternative bookstore. The commercial faction broke away and opened a competitive store, half a mile down Bloor Street, in the affluent direction. The remaining group stayed behind, clinging to a vision of selling books that would be notable for their left-leaning politics, and holding to the idea of creating an organization that would be based on friendship, equality and non-hierarchical management style. This continues to be the sustaining vision for the current group.

At first the organization was not collectively-managed and had a strict functional division of labour as well as a five-step salary structure. This soon changed, reflecting the wish of the workers to become a model of alternative management. Within two years there was no formal management structure, wages were the same for everyone, and weekly staff meetings were the primary location of decision-making. At the time of these changes, SCM acquired a non-profit board structure consisting of twelve persons: four from the staff, four from the

Student Christian Movement and four from the surrounding community (elected at the annual general meeting). The board, however, as workers are quick to point out, 'takes a real low profile'. For most staff the board is a perfunctory group that has one important function - providing the organization with a non-profit status which provides certain tax advantages. On occasion, though, the board has taken a higher profile, especially around recurring financial crises.

In 1986, there were twelve people on staff - six men and six women - who all work less than full-time, ranging from ten to thirty-five hours a week. They have what they call 'rational' differentials in benefits and wages. For the first three months, a new worker receives a little less money than everyone else, and workers with five years' tenure get a slightly higher salary. If a worker has a dependent child or partner (who makes less than $10,000) they receive some extra compensation. After the first year, each worker gets two weeks vacation and gains more with each year of seniority up to a limit of five weeks. Wages are higher than for most bookstore workers, the top salary being $15,000 for a thirty-five hour week.

Staff turnover at SCM is low. When a vacancy does occur, it is usually filled through a friendship network, rather than public advertisement. There are often one or two people 'in the wings' who are known to be interested in a job. As a result of low turnover and the friendship hiring procedures, most workers have been together for a number of years and know each other quite intimately, even though they work part-time. Socializing in the evening and at the weekend is common.

The current staff group are mostly from middle to upper middle class backgrounds; they are well educated, highly literate and range in age from early twenties to mid-forties, with one member in his sixties. Although from reasonably affluent and often conservative family backgrounds, workers see themselves as having rejected elements of the value system associated with their background. As one workers told me:

> My parents don't understand why I do this. I was supposed to be a lawyer or something I guess. I find I am in a strange conflict with my family roots. On the one hand, they were always talking about compassion, caring - you know, the Christian thing. But on the other hand, they really believe the world is about getting social-economic advantage. They can't understand that I would choose not to be like them, but I like my lifestyle. My work here brings in enough money to survive and allows me time to have a second career as a dancer - which doesn't bring in much money at all.

Those people that have left the collective are remembered as having done so for personal and financial reasons, withdrawal having always been voluntary. Although no one recalls a situation where a co-worker had to be rejected, workers do suggest when pressed that, 'not everyone has fit in' and 'not everyone could work in this sort of organization', which appears to reflect a set of values that most workers have before they join the collective and that is further inculcated once they are on-site. In general, there is a high premium placed on hard work, political affiliation with the left, and gentleness.

Hard work is seen to occur naturally as a result of liking the job, and this was succinctly put by one worker:

> If you love books and what they represent, you don't mind all the work involved in ordering, unpacking, shelving, inventory. It's hard work, but is it work?

Political affinity has to do with demonstrating congruence with the progressive thrust of the book collection. Workers need to be in

general agreement with a 'progressive' left stance in issue areas such as: labour organizing, abortion, racial equality, gay rights, gender-role levelling, peace and nuclear energy. These values of hard work, political commitment, and allegiance to progressive social movements, make up a basic common belief system. Disagreement with these core beliefs would probably result in considerable tension and 'not fitting in'. But, as the workers themselves note, this would be very unlikely to happen because new members are 'known' before they are taken on staff.

In tandem with these common values, and perhaps produced from them, workers are quite homogeneous, and appear to share a number of personality traits. Everyone speaks in a quiet, non-aggressive tone of voice, and workers appear predisposed to compassion, caring and co-operation. This 'common' personality, and the values it embraces, are personified in one very influential woman named Bev, who has been with the store since it opened.

Bev's small size, soft voice and gentle manner fail to signal her large role in running the store. She has become a role model of hard work, political commitment, gentleness, fairness and co-operation. Bev spearheaded and gave direction to the breakaway group that was to become SCM. I asked Bev why she works at SCM, and why she has stayed such a long time with the organization, and she responds:

> I think that the flexibility here is one of the main reasons I enjoy the place. I work thirty hours a week, six days a week and that suits my personal situation; likewise, another staff member works twenty eight hours a week because she is taking some courses and wants extra time. Another person currently has some financial difficulties so we allow him to work eight hours a day. A lot of things we do here are because of the needs of people, and I don't imagine you would find that elsewhere. People in turn try to meet

> the needs of the organization. It is a mutual process.
>
> I find personally after having worked in a hierarchical structure that I would find it extraordinarily difficult to work in a structure in which everyone wasn't equal and didn't have an equal say. You have to be personally responsible for everything - you can't compartmentalize your worklife as much. I find I am not alone in worrying about each area of the store and I like this sense of togetherness.

Reflecting for a moment on what she has said, Bev says that the flexibility, while a benefit, can also be a problem. In her view, 'the whole thing relies on personal initiative and responsibility; otherwise, the whole thing falls apart.'

Bev ascribes much of the success of SCM to its ability to find a 'social consensus', a term she said she was using to mean that everyone was in general agreement about what the organization was all about. In the same regard, she went on to say:

> I feel more comfortable with consensus decision making which means you try to persuade - you don't come to a decision until everyone agrees with the decision or agrees not to stand in the way. This approach can take a very long time, but in the end, there is less doubt about the level of commitment.

Other workers seem to genuinely like Bev and actually use words such as 'mother-figure', 'mentor' and 'friend' to describe their relationship. Workers will turn to Bev and ask: 'What do you think?', or 'How do you think we should do that?' These questions appear not to be asked with a sense of deference or with a sense that Bev is the boss. Rather, the tone is one of respect for her opinion. By the same token, other workers will just as often respond to a comment made by Bev by saying, 'I'm not at all sure that will work', or, in a friendly, rather than sarcastic tone, 'You're so clever'. Nevertheless, one imagines that not hitting it off with Bev, or not mirroring the values she embodies, would make life somewhat difficult at SCM.

Not only do workers seem to like Bev in a genuine way, they obviously like each other. It is not unusual to hear staff quietly laughing together, or to notice one person helping another move heavy books about, or to observe someone offering to make a cup of tea for everyone else. Conversations are often social in character, with workers asking each other about aspects of their personal and social life beyond the store. Even when out of sight of customers, in the backroom, workers continue their co-operative, friendly style. Although 'Christian' is a word that workers seldom use, it is a word that nicely encapsulates the interpersonal climate at SCM. Relationships appear to be based on goodwill, charity and fellowship.

5.3 Work Routines

Because of the great flexibility in hours worked, the configuration of workers varies from day to day. Workers are unanimous in appreciating the flexibility, and most also like the changing social patterns and look forward to seeing someone they may not have worked with for a while. This enormous flexibility has required close attention to work allocation, something at which SCM seems extraordinarily good. In the small back room is a master chart of all the jobs that must be done each month in order to keep the business going (cash register duty in two-hour segments, mail-opening, garbage, store opening and closing, accounts, etc.). Each task has a number of hours written beside it along with other important details. At the beginning of each weekly collective meeting, everyone fills up their hours by selecting from among tasks. One of the monthly jobs is to

co-ordinate all of the work and to make sure everything is getting done, that things do not get lost between the cracks and that in general the store is operating smoothly. Not everyone likes every job, but there is a strong sense that tasks should not be 'ghettoized', and that everyone must rotate through the various activities. One exception to this is the part-time accountant (an older man in his sixties) who keeps the major ledger of financial activities. The accountant comes in weekly to do his work and does not take a role in other aspects of running the store. This has worked out well for SCM, as consistency and expertise in the bookkeeping has meant that mistakes have been infrequent.

Within this framework of job rotation, everyone has a specialist buying function for particular subjects. Some workers do this on their own or with one or two others, depending on the number of hours they work and the size of the buying category. Bev, for example, handles the political studies area and appears to have a knowledge of print materials in this subject that would rival that of a specialized librarian. While I was on site, Bev showed me a reading list in Politics that a University professor had sent to her for comment, and this seemed to me indicative of the sort of respect that she and other staff had been able to achieve.

Everyone expresses tremendous satisfaction with the specialist aspect of their job, and the comments of two workers are typical.

> I really like this part of my job. Being able to influence the stock is the most important ingredient in my job satisfaction and motivation. I'm totally committed to being in a collective, but it is buying and giving my collection direction that matters most to me.

> This could take all my time - there are just so many books being published in these fields. For every book I decide to buy there is

> a huge amount of administrative work. Not only that, but our customers are always wanting advice about things. I spend about a fifth of my time with customers. And then I have to drop everything when a university professor calls and wants help with a book list and wants me to organize a large purchase from an obscure press. I can't imagine being bored. You want to know what I like about working here? Well, it's all of these things.

In addition to providing job satisfaction, this way of working appears to have built into it some quite distinct advantages for the overall organization. This approach, while allowing for some job specialization, seems to have prevented a loss of identity with the whole. Chatting about her work, one worker said, 'Everybody does some things that are vital to maintaining the organization, but is also able to have a pet project'. SCM's approach to work organization is also thought by workers to make it easier for outsiders to deal effectively with the organization by providing a specialist to contact for each subject. Professors who place bulk orders, customers who want information or wish to place a special order, come to know and develop a relationship with the staff person responsible for each particular area.

In many respects, SCM's day-to-day operation and routines are similar to those that might be found in any number of bookshops. The store is open six days a week, Monday to Saturday. It opens at 9:30 every day except Tuesday when it opens at 11:00 to allow for the collective meeting. Work takes place 'out front' and 'out back' and 'in between'. 'Out front' means either on the cash or in direct customer contact. 'Out back' means in the back room doing administrative jobs, unpacking books, checking orders, dealing with phone calls and ordering. 'In between' means moving back and forth between the sections of the store in order to deal with a variety of jobs at the same time - things

like reshelving books, placing a special order, talking to a customer, and phoning a tardy publisher. Someone is always on the cash, but it is a different person every two hours. Workers monitor their subject area as they go about their various tasks. If things get extra busy out front, then everyone is expected to drop what they are doing and help out. This level of co-operation seems to happen quite naturally without anyone needing to ask for or demand help. Peak times seem totally unpredictable, with the exception of the beginning of a school term. Although it varies, there are usually three staff members in the store at any one time.

Staff members are very knowledgeable and helpful - 'not just clerks!', as they like to say. If you ask for a book they usually mention a couple of others that deal with the same topic. Customers are thought to want lots of 'space' to browse and are not interrupted unless they give off a signal such as looking around in search of a staff person. Customers come from all over the city, not only in response to the bookstore's specialized collection, but, as several customers told me, 'because it is so nice here'. Many of them are friends and the majority are repeats. A few customers are routinely asked for advice about what to buy or what to take out of stock. The store is noted for doing special orders, but recently has not advertised this fact as it takes so much time as to be financially imprudent. Inventory is monitored through the cash register, which is also a computer that gives a record of what has been bought as well as how much money has been taken in. Some books sell better than others. Good sellers are featured prominently within each section, but poor sellers are often

kept on the shelf for a year or two to ensure that the collection is what they describe as 'adequate'.

5.4 To Close or Not to Close?

Predictably perhaps, workers do report times when life inside the organization has been less routine and serene, when tension and disagreements have erupted and the negotiation process has been more problematic. In reporting about these times, workers usually make a connection with those periods in which the business has experienced economic difficulties. During these times, consensus has occasionally been next to impossible to achieve by their preferred route involving discussion and fairly casual conversation, and the group talks about having been unable to make a unanimous decision. In some cases, this has prompted the use of a majority vote form of decision making, and in other cases it has resulted in unresolved conflict and disagreement.

During the early 1980's, SCM was very successful economically. 1981 was a bumper year for sales. New staff were taken on; there was talk of growth and expansion. By 1984 this 'boom' in business had been replaced by a very serious downturn in sales, and there was a major problem confronting the store: expenses were higher than revenues and customers had dropped off drastically. What seems to have happened is that 1984 proved to be the year that a number of changes that had been occurring in the Toronto bookstore market finally caught up with SCM.

In our group meeting, workers told me that:

> In the last few years book selling has changed dramatically. The number of bookstores in Toronto has grown steadily and the attitude of our book suppliers has changed significantly. Not only that, but customers have changed as well. We used to think that our customers

would always be loyal and would always be around - time has proved us wrong.

From my conversations with staff, I was able to piece together some of the changes. When the store first opened, it provided books that were in high demand and unavailable in most stores in Toronto. Its primary customers were the radical and the left-leaning academics, and both groups were at the doorstep. It mattered little that the store was hard to find; it had a selective and loyal clientele. Over the years this changed. Bookstores became a growth industry in Toronto, some setting up in direct competition with the specialized and alternative fields that formed the core of the SCM collection. To take two examples, there is now a bookstore devoted exclusively to gay studies, and another that concentrates on women's issues. Other bookshops forming a part of this growth industry are large, with diverse collections, and discount pricing policies. Toronto now has one store that egotistically describes itself as, 'the world's biggest bookstore', and it carries a range of 'alternative' literature that would have been unheard of in the 70's. In addition, the University of Toronto, after years of inadequacy, opened in 1986 a huge public bookstore just two blocks from SCM. While the so called world's biggest bookstore maintains its competitive edge by hiring at minimum wage and discounting, the University's bookstore has the advantage of also housing the enormously profitable textbooks for a student body of 30,000. These commercial changes have been in tandem with enormous social change in the fabric of Toronto - change that has also had the effect of eroding SCM's primary clientele. Formerly loyal customers have moved to other less expensive parts of the city and many seem to

have changed their reading interests; the formerly loyal University community just as often chooses the University bookstore or one of the large discount emporiums.

In conversations with workers recalling the financial crisis of 1984, they indicated that there had been a variety of opinions about the best strategy for adapting to and dealing with the problem. One worker was reported to have left the group because he felt the only reasonable approach was to move to a more accessible location and to downplay the 'alternative' thrust of the collections. He felt strongly enough about his proposal that he forced a vote and when it was defeated he got up and left. Nonetheless, the idea behind his proposal continued to be a focus for debate and negotiation, and workers recall asking themselves questions such as: should we change and become a different kind of bookstore? Should we try to weather the storm and do nothing? Is it time for everyone to start looking for new employment? Coming to the realization that not everyone had a similar vision of the future, and that agreements would probably have to be in the form of compromises, was reported to me as a startling revelation and a painful experience. Up until that time, it seems, nearly everyone was operating with the assumption that SCM was an egalitarian and happy family that could talk about things and reach an agreeable decision. One worker, talking about the events of that time, said:

> As a result, for the first time, we had to deal with conflict and disagreement. This seemed to require a set of skills that we had never had to develop, and some of us didn't even want to develop! In a way, you might say we were trapped by our history.

In the group interview, this idea of being trapped by history was taken up again.

> It would have been easier if we had all started in 1984 [meaning if we had no history] and said, look we're going to have to set ourselves up like 'this' in order to survive. But we had built up a pretty casual pattern based on success without much effort. Buyers had relative autonomy and it seemed to work out ok. But in 1984, we had to confront some real hard decisions, especially to do with the fact that some subject areas were not selling. This meant that we had to confront each other about subject areas that people felt personally very attached to. Consensus became a real issue because what we were saying was that we had to be more responsive to our market and pay less attention to our political and personal goals when it came to buying. Not everyone agreed with this and felt that it might be better to go under than become a different kind of bookshop. Our staff meetings became very tense and conflictual - those people committed to the least successful subjects took it personally and some people were not speaking to each other. This was really unusual for us and we didn't have any mechanisms to cope with that sort of thing.
>
> ...we started having real trouble agreeing on goals. We couldn't agree about the kind of store we should be. We all wanted to retain our social action and social injustice thrust, but we couldn't agree on what that meant in the mid 1980's. People had their fiefdoms and it was very hard to challenge that.

In the absence of a consensus about the future of the store, a number of short-term decisions were taken. The usually dormant board was called into action, and they initiated a fund raising drive which brought in sufficient money to avert bankruptcy; several workers went on unemployment insurance (although continued to work); a very successful sale cleared a large amount of inventory; and buyers were 'asked' to give increased attention to 'popularizing' stock lists.

As it turned out, the decisions that staff made in the 1984 period had the effect of deferring a problem that did not go away. By the time of my visit, the financial crisis of 1984 had been resolved, but only temporarily. 1986 was giving every indication of reproducing the economic difficulties of the earlier period, and workers seemed once again to be searching for a consensus about what to do. The debates seemed evocative of the ones that were reported to have occurred in 1984

- there was talk of moving the store to a location with more public frontage, devoting the front section to mass market fiction, reducing the staff and even closing the bookshop. Indicative of the seriousness of the problem, was the fact that book suppliers were requesting payment in advance rather than the traditional policy of payment after sale. This meant that anything that did not sell in less than a month was likely to become a financial burden.

In spite of the economic problems in search of a viable solution, SCM was clearly maintaining the pervasive qualities of gentleness, compassion and caring that I described earlier in this essay. Discussion about the store's dilemma that took place while I was on site seemed to occur as much from my initiation and prompting as from any observable or systematic approach to problem solving. I began to wonder if the staff at SCM had made a decision about the store's future even though it was not being voiced, and if the group, at some unspoken level, had agreed not to change in any systematic or dramatic way. Perhaps, I thought, the group has developed an underlying, implicit agreement to continue in their traditional way, and if that meant the end of the business then so be it. I tested this idea with Bev and she smiled broadly and said: 'Well, Gerry, you might be right; maybe our time has come, but we do have to try, don't we?'

5.5 Summary

As I said at the beginning, perhaps the cave-like entrance to the bookstore represents a symbol through which to understand the organization. Inside is a warm, friendly, harmonious group and outside,

at least in the latter years, is a hostile, competitive world that gets to influence the rules of survival. Inside is a self-perpetuating social system, supported by friends/customers who appreciate the intimacy of the store and the select nature of the products. As long as a symbiotic relationship could be maintained with selected constituents on the outside, the inside could stay cozy and protected. But as one side of the relationship changed, the collective was left without the skills or possibly the desire to adapt. To adapt sufficiently was to reckon with transformation. For SCM, changes of the type that appeared to be necessary seemed very threatening to their sense of 'self' and to their cultural integrity. In spite of the severe economic crisis confronting SCM, my observation was that it was bravely maintaining its collective ethos. It seemed more important to the organization to retain its democratic, peaceful and serene culture than to succumb to an economic imperative.

I left SCM with the feeling that while it suggests some of the ways that a group of workers might go about creating and sustaining an organization culture based on equality, co-operation and goodwill, it also provides an illustration of the potential risks of doing this in a highly competitive business sector that will do whatever is necessary to make a profit and edge-out competition.

5.6 Update

When I finished my field visit to SCM it was obvious that the organization was in serious financial trouble. As it turned out these troubles did not go away but got worse. In 1988 the staff agreed to an

amalgamation and merger with another, more prosperous but sympathetic, bookstore. This arrangement injected some much needed revenue into SCM's coffers, but did not come without a price tag. Part of the agreement was that SCM staff would become part of the hierarchically-managed partner and gear their collection even more toward a general market. Several staff left at the time of the merger, and the overall staff complement was reduced. In spite of these changes, SCM continued to flounder. The store location continued to be a problem and I was told that staff morale deteriorated. The expected improvement in sales never materialized and the several sales that were held served mainly to decrease stock without changing the longer term situation. In May 1989, SCM officially closed.

CHAPTER 6

NEWHAM CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (NCDA)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the Newham Co-operative Development Agency (NCDA), a worker-managed organization located in London, England. NCDA is involved in promoting and supporting worker co-operatives, by offering counselling, advice, training and other support services. The Agency has a staff of six, and is financed mainly by the east-end London borough of Newham under a small business development programme, although it receives additional funding from the European Social Development Scheme. It is one of over forty worker co-operative support organizations in the United Kingdom and defines its potential client group as the 209,500 people living in the borough of Newham.

My association with NCDA began in July 1986, when I responded to a job advertisement for a short term, contractually-limited, training co-ordinator. I subsequently obtained a six month contract with the organization to undertake an assessment of training needs and design short seminar courses. The nature of my contract was such that I was on site three days a week during the period September 1986 to April 1987.

During the selection interviews for the position, I indicated that I was a doctoral student researching worker-managed organizations, and that I would be interested in having NCDA as one of my case studies. The interviewers, and subsequently all of the workers, agreed to my proposal, and as a result, I acquired three roles within the

organization - peer, employee and researcher. My roles as a peer and employee gave me first-hand, personal experience about working in a co-operatively-managed organization. At the same time, my role as a researcher acted as a reminder to me of the necessity to look beyond my personal experience and carefully explore and document the experience of others. In the essay to follow, I set out to document and share the information that I gathered from each of these perspectives.

The case study begins by providing an account of the origins and development of the organization. It then focuses on the people, work routines, worklife experiences and negotiation processes that were characteristic of the group in the 1986-1987 period. Using my own observations and experience, combined with reports from other workers, the case study highlights the way in which NCDA was largely constructed as a 'world of individuals'. This met some of the needs of individuals and provided a foundation for getting the work done, but was also the source of conflict and disagreement. The result was an integrating and negotiation process that was frequently problematic for the group. As with the other case studies, this one ends with an update recounting changes since the time of my original inquiries.

6.2 First Impressions

The offices for the Newham Co-operative Development Agency are open four days a week - Monday to Thursday - and are located on the first floor of an Edwardian office building on Stratford High Street, the commercial hub of Newham. There is no sign or other identification on the outside of the building, although there is an office directory

inside the main door which indicates that the Agency does exist, and that it shares the building with several small businesses.

Once the building is found, the offices are designed to be difficult to get into. The first worker on site must unlock six different locks with six different keys, as well as disengage an expensive security device - precautions that reflect the very high crime rate and vandalism in the area. Even at that, the Agency has been broken into a number of times, once while I was on site.

From the main entrance, one must walk up a flight of stairs and then down a corridor in order to locate the offices. The last door before arriving at the offices has a sign indicating that NCDA lies behind the steel door, and another sign indicating that entry is only possible by ringing a buzzer. Once all of the security apparatus has been overcome, the offices are pleasant and welcoming. They are located on the quiet backside of the building, and large windows let in lots of natural light. Free coffee, tea and usually a couple of biscuits are available in a small kitchen - the first room you come to on entering the offices, and a natural gathering point.

After the kitchen is a separate room with an IBM computer and a sophisticated printer. The machinery is in high demand, so the room is routinely busy. On the other side of the computer room is the main work area, which is large and open-concept with five desks, a small library, a photocopier, a storage area, video equipment, filing cabinets and a comfy sofa in an isolated corner. This large open space is the focal point for the organization, and is the site of most 'desk' work and all staff meetings. It can be a busy spot, with people chatting, the phone

ringing and the photocopier clanging, but on most occasions it is quiet and peaceful. At the front of the building, there are a couple of separate rooms that are used for teaching, meetings with clients and extra office space.

In the office and teaching areas, you might find Bob, Anne, Cathy, Lucia, Moses or myself - the group of workers - or, you might find a couple of clients hanging about, attending a meeting, or watching a training video. A Tuesday morning would find the group of six workers sitting in a circle in the large open space having their weekly workers' meeting. This meeting routinely takes over two hours, and deals with many matters to do with running the Agency, ranging from discussions about the progress of clients to whose turn it is to clean up the kitchen. These meetings, as I will point out later in this essay, tend to be the only occasions on which workers come together for business or social purposes.

Returning to the street, a visitor to NCDA would first notice the general state of decay in the area. The building beside the Agency is a burnt-out shell, the top floor appearing to serve mainly as a home to hundreds of pigeons, and the building on the other side is boarded up with a fading 'To Let' sign. In one or another doorway, a 'down-and-outer' might be clutching a fast-cooling, take-away cup of tea or, just as likely, a nearly empty bottle of gin. The external surroundings of the Agency are a not very subtle reminder that this part of London symbolizes the under-belly of Thatcher's so called 'economic miracle'. The borough of Newham has the dubious distinctions of having one of the highest unemployment rates in Britain, one of the highest crime rates in

London, one of the highest number of new immigrants, and one of the lowest per capita incomes. In concert with a handful of other under-funded groups and Agencies, NCDA was created to play a role in tackling these almost overwhelming social, economic and environmental problems.

Moving about half a mile down the High Street there is another set of buildings which contain an organization that also provides important contextual clues to the story of NCDA. This is where the borough of Newham offices are located. The Council is controlled by Labour politicians who include the development and support of worker co-operatives as part of their mandate.

Another influential set of buildings in the story of NCDA are located about two miles away from the Agency. These buildings cover over an acre of land and contain the Clay's Lane Housing Co-operative. A number of people associated with this housing co-operative were part of the group that founded NCDA, and some continue to have a role in its ongoing operations. This Co-operative is symbolic within the borough of the success that self-help and co-operative groups can achieve, even against the social, economic odds of a setting such as Newham.

6.3 The Making of the Collective

Nearly all of the founding members are no longer associated with the Agency, but early reports and minutes of meetings, combined with conversations I had with Shaun, a founding member who was and continues to be part of Clay's Lane, helped me to piece together the story of the early days in the organization.

The Agency began in 1981. The founding group was an informally-

constituted group of people from the borough Council, the Clay's Lane Housing Co-operative and a number of community activists. As Shaun told me,

> I guess you could say we found each other in a pub. The pub had a reputation for attracting people who were interested in having the daily ritual of drinking a pint or two include political discussion. Several of us were very excited about the success of Clay's Lane and wondered if co-operatives, more generally, might be a solution to the problem of unemployment in Newham. Gradually, this idea became the focus of conversation and gradually a little group of interested people formed around the idea. My recollection is that we were also aware of the fact that quite a few local governments were starting co-op development agencies and we probably thought we could get on that bandwagon. In our group were some people from the Council and a couple of them were already interested in worker co-ops - I think that Labour was pushing the idea at the time - and the ball began to roll from there.

In late 1981, this group was successful in obtaining start-up funding from the now defunct Greater London Council and from Newham Council. With this money, one member of the founding group - an unemployed community activist - was hired to undertake research that involved making contact with existing worker co-operatives in the borough, visiting co-op development agencies in other parts of the country to see what they were doing, and exploring the potential for co-op businesses generally.

For a time, the organization continued to function informally, using the pub as its headquarters. In 1982, the paid member returned to the group with the results of his research. He reported finding several worker co-operatives in the area, including a fairly prosperous bookstore and cafe, and indicated that his visits to other co-op support agencies suggested that these kind of organizations were playing an important role in the social and economic development of their areas. He also reported locating a number of people who were interested in

starting a small business on co-operative lines. His visits to other agencies also uncovered some potential sources of additional funding, and revealed the fact that there was a fairly elaborate national worker co-operative support network where help and assistance could be obtained.

On the basis of these findings, the group prepared a second report to Newham Council requesting funding to set up formally a co-operative development agency in the borough of Newham. This report suggested that the Agency should have a mandate to operate outside the local government bureaucracy and that it should be governed by an elected body of interested people from the community. At the same time, application was made to the Greater London Council and the European Social Fund for additional funding. These appeals were all successful, and by mid-1982 there was enough money available to establish an office and begin hiring some workers. All of this funding was for just one year, renewable if the Agency proved to be a success.

Since most of Britain's co-operative support agencies came on line only in the early 1980's, NCDA had few models to mirror. This appears to have created a trial-and-error approach to both the work activities and the management of the organization, although a particular set of values and assumptions about what the new organization should be like did prevail.

Shaun reports that a suggestion from some of the members of the borough Council to set up offices in an unused section of the Council headquarters was quickly rejected, since the group wanted to ensure that it had autonomy from its financiers. This view reflected a desire on

the part of the founders to set themselves up as a community-based, rather than government-based, agency so that potential clients would perceive and experience the organization as 'non-governmental', and 'non-bureaucratic'. Information obtained during the visits to co-op support agencies in other part of the country had convinced the group that alliances with government that were too close, physically and/or organizationally, had a tendency to result in conflict and disagreement over values and rules. In several cases, it had been noted that some co-operative support agencies were merely a branch of a local government's small business development department, and that the idea of 'co-operative businesses' was often in conflict with more established approaches and models. The group wanted the Agency to mirror and model the organizational values they would be recommending for others - namely, a co-operative and non-hierarchical approach - and this, they believed, would be best achieved if they were quite separate from what Shaun called a 'government mentality'.

Reports from the past also suggest that the group was greatly influenced by the Clay's Lane approach to organizational management. At Clay's Lane, everyone associated with the housing co-operative was encouraged to take an active role in running the enterprise. From the larger group, a management committee was elected to make routine decisions, but responsibility for overall policy and direction, at least in theory, resided in the collective as a whole. The Clay's Lane management committee itself, which included its several paid staff, characterized itself as non-hierarchical and egalitarian.

Closely linked to the founders' support for the model-in-use at

Clay's Lane, was the importance they attached to 'empowerment'. Part of the process of establishing a co-operative business, they believed, included shifting values and behaviour so that people could feel in control of what they were doing, and this included giving clients the opportunity to become an integral part of running and giving shape to the Agency.

These values and assumptions - opposition to government bureaucracy and rigid rules, and the desire to empower clients - provided the foundation for early developments inside the organization. Two workers were hired in 1982 to formally begin the work of the Agency. These workers, a male and a female, were hired as equal partners, with no salary differential and no separation of roles or tasks. Their mandate, according to minutes from a meeting of the time, was stated as such:

- provide assistance and counsel to existing worker co-operatives;
- act as a rallying point for sharing information and resources;
- promote the idea of worker co-operatives in the borough through open-house introductory training sessions;
- counsel individuals and groups expressing interest in starting a co-op;
- research the sources of financial assistance available for co-ops and help groups obtain these funds.

In these early days, the Agency had no formal structure separating paid staff from the founding group, and no formalized route for incorporating clients into the management of the organization. Before long, though, these very informal arrangements changed significantly as a result of the preparation of a written constitution - a requirement placed on the group by the financial backers.

The constitution did manage, nevertheless, to incorporate the

values held by the founders. It created a three tier organizational structure consisting of a co-op forum, a planning committee and a workers' group. The co-op forum was designed to meet quarterly and include everyone associated with the Agency (founders, friends, councillors, clients and workers), for the purpose of sharing resources, information, expertise and, perhaps most importantly, to have some fun together. One meeting a year was designated 'the annual meeting', and was to include food and alcohol. Included in the terms of reference for the co-op forum was the election of a planning committee from within its ranks.

The twelve member planning committee was to be elected by the co-op forum, with a mandate to develop policy, hire staff, approve budgets, and to serve as the formal 'corporate entity'. The constitution required the planning committee to meet monthly, and to be organized formally with a chairperson, secretary and treasurer. The constitution also provided for the establishment of a workers' group which was to be delegated the day-to-day running of the Agency. The workers' group was to have no differentials in salary or status, and to manage themselves without a formal hierarchy.

According to the available reports, however, all three of these organizational groupings had trouble living up to the somewhat idealistic roles and expectations that had been laid down in the constitution. The co-op forum proved to be a better idea on paper than in practice, most noticeable by the fact that people failed to show up for the quarterly meetings. Consequently, the number of meetings of the forum was 'unofficially' reduced to one or two per year. In practice,

the only meeting of the co-op forum tended to be the annual meeting with its food, drink and fun components kept intact. The planning committee as well seemed to run out of steam rather quickly. At the outset, it busied itself by hammering out some objectives and recruiting staff. Once these things were achieved, though, its ongoing role became less certain. Minutes from early meetings suggest that interest diminished, evidenced by the high turnover of membership and the ongoing struggle to obtain a quorum for meetings. The workers' group, as a result, became the more important operational component of the organization and began to acquire more and more influence in the development of policy and objectives.

By 1984, there were six part-time workers on staff, a testament to the organization's ability to attract financial backing. By this time as well, the group was publishing an annual report. The 1984 Annual Report indicated that:

> The six workers at NCDA work according to the principles they seek to promote. All work a 23 hour week and are on the same pay scale. The workers manage themselves through weekly meetings which seek to make decisions on a consensus basis. There are no specialized job descriptions, though workers tend to specialize slightly in those areas where they have particular interests and expertise. Chores such as cleaning and book-keeping are dealt with on a rota basis. All workers are expected to monitor their use of time and these records show that over the past year workers time has been allocated as follows:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | -work with new and trading co-ops | 33% |
> | -promotion and training | 33% |
> | -liaison, administration, funding | 33% |

While this public image of the organization was one of harmony and efficient productivity, on the inside it seems that there was more instability. Workers still on staff from this period report that the

work routines had become more specialized and unequal than the Annual Report indicated, and that the workgroup was somewhat less than cohesive. Behind the public voice, as well, it appears that on the inside there were disappointments to do with clients. Getting worker co-operatives off the ground had proved to be a very difficult task and there were only a few success stories. Not only that, but several individual clients and groups had written letters of complaint about the work of the Agency, a couple of which had been copied to the borough Council. One letter expressed feelings of having been 'abandoned' by workers, and another indicated that workers were almost never available when needed, complaining that staff had made little effort in helping to obtain start-up funding.

By 1986, three of the six workers had resigned. One of these former workers believed she had been wrongfully dismissed, and initiated action with an industrial tribunal. And Richard, another worker who left during this period, moved 'upstairs' to become part of the staff in the housing co-operative group, reporting to me retrospectively that he felt he had been 'kicked-out' because he was 'a workaholic'. Staying on were Bob and Anne whom we shall meet shortly.

The resulting shortage of staff temporarily paralyzed the work of the Agency and resulted in a number of important changes, not the least of which was a reactivated planning committee. The planning committee, in conjunction with the remaining workers, developed and instituted a number of changes to do with the recruitment of new staff, the development of personnel policies and the elaboration of procedures for working with clients. An affirmative action policy was at the core of

these policy changes, requiring workers and clients alike to be selected from the most disadvantaged groups in the borough (defined in this instance as people from Asian and black racial backgrounds). In addition, decisions were taken to 'legitimize' and 'normalize' the specialized approach to work activities, and to recruit new staff with more clearly defined roles.

When I arrived in October 1986, the results of these decisions were just beginning to take effect. Four new people, including myself, had been hired according to the new recruiting policy, and everyone was 'assigned' a fairly specific area of work activity. Less settled, however, was the area of personnel policy. After some debate, the planning committee had decided not to establish rigid policy in this area, recommending instead that workers should attempt to create their own internal working constitution.

The 1984-1986 period, as a result, was a formative one for the organization, and by the time I arrived, the significant events from this period were still the subject of much discussion and debate. With these thoughts in mind, let us now re-enter the organization of late 1986.

6.4 Collective Workers

I began my employment at NCDA the first week of October 1986. Although I was late in arriving because of train and underground delays, I was the first on site and could not get into the offices. As a result, I wandered upstairs and found my way to the housing co-op offices located in the same building, where I met Richard. Richard, as

it turned out, had recently resigned from his employment at NCDA, and soon after I had introduced myself, he cautioned me to be 'very careful', because, he said, 'everything is really crazy down there'. A bit puzzled by these remarks, I returned downstairs and this time found the door open.

Anne, a worker who had been on the panel that hired me, greeted me with an apology about the fact that no one had been there when I arrived. She said that she was having a crisis with her child care arrangements and would have to leave just as soon as anyone else arrived. 'I'm sorry' she said, 'but you may have to fend for yourself today.'

Lucia arrived shortly after that, and like Anne, said that she would only be there for an hour as she too was having some problems with child care arrangements. Once Anne left, Lucia told me that she was also one of the new workers, having started the week before, and that two other new workers, Moses and Cathy, would probably be in later in the day. We were interrupted by a telephone call from Bob, a worker who had been at my selection interview, who indicated that problems with his car would delay his arrival until at least mid-afternoon. It all felt a bit unsettling. Bob did arrive later in the day and once he had issued me with the several keys that were necessary to disengage the locks and security devices, he handed me a time sheet, indicating that I should keep a record of my activities. 'Sorry about all the confusion' he said, 'but tomorrow should be a bit better - we have a workers meeting at 10am sharp.'

On my first day with the organization, as a result, I felt isolated

and confused about what I had observed. There was obviously a great deal of freedom for everyone to meet the needs and pressures of their personal lives; at the same time, though, I found myself wondering about Bob's remark to do with time sheets and his insistence that the meeting would take place at 10am sharp. Were not these two characteristics somewhat at odds? Over the course of the next few weeks and months, once I had gotten to know workers better, I came to feel somewhat less isolated, but the tension I imagined might exist between personal freedom and organizational needs proved to be very real indeed.

Everyone at Newham works a different number of hours, ranging from a low of seventeen to a high of thirty-five hours a week. All staff members have flexibility in setting the actual times that they will be on site, although all workers are expected to attend the Tuesday morning collective meeting. All workers receive the same prorated wages, based on just over 13,000 pounds a year for a 37 hour work week (above average by British standards). Workers with dependent children receive some assistance for child-minding and vacation pay is allocated according to the number of hours worked.

At NCDA there has traditionally been considerable importance placed on the diversity of people working for the organization. This has resulted in an unusual emphasis on worker heterogeneity, although anyone hoping to work for NCDA would need to demonstrate sympathy with the co-operative movement and with at least some of the ideas of socialism and the 'left'. Particularly in the last round of hiring, workers were selected not for what they had in common, but for how they differed in social background. By design, therefore, staff members tend to have

different social, economic, racial and educational backgrounds, and generally they have not met one another before being hired. There is particular importance attached to avoiding discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion, sexuality, marital status and class, and hiring is oriented to generating a staff mix that corresponds to the client population, as well as providing the skills needed for the job role that is vacant. Particularly significant for a prospective staff member is the ability to establish familiarity with selected constituencies in the borough of Newham. It is not necessary to live in Newham in order to do this (only one worker actually lives in Newham), but it is useful to have familiarity with larger representative communities, such as the black community and the Asian community. In an attempt to ensure that the many and complex selection criteria are upheld, hiring at NCDA involves a group interview with a panel that includes members of staff, the planning committee and representatives from the client co-ops.

Bob began his employment with the Agency in 1983, and has been on staff longer than anyone else. Bob has a contract to work thirty-five hours per week, more hours than anyone else on staff. This, combined with his long tenure, fairly assertive manner and strong opinions, give him somewhat of a leadership role in the organization.

Bob is a short man with red hair and a great deal of energy. He grew up in Scotland, is from a prosperous middle-class background, and by 1986 was in his late thirties. The first impression that I had of Bob was of a brisk, no nonsense sort of individual, who seemed to have little time for socializing or idle chat. Most of our early

conversations focused exclusively on work, and my initial attempts to get him to talk more personally, or about past events, were invariably circumvented. As time went on, though, he did open-up and gradually took me into his confidence. On a couple of occasions we went out to a gay pub called 'The Fallen Angel', and it was in this setting that he seemed comfortable in talking about himself and his thoughts about working at NCDA. On one of these outings, he looked up at the pub sign and said, 'There you have it - NCDA in a nutshell'.

Before working for the Agency, Bob was involved in the co-operative housing sector, and he recalls that experience as 'a lesson in the problems of bureaucracy'. He says that he was attracted to NCDA because he believed it would be less bureaucratic and because it would give him the opportunity to work in a more extended way with clients. I asked him if the Agency had lived up to his expectations and he said:

> You may be surprised to hear me say this, but in many ways it has. This is a small place, and some of the things I disliked about bureaucracy had to do with the size of the places I used to work. Over the years we have had to institute more and more rules and standardized ways of doing things, but I don't think we have created a bureaucracy here. I'm the first to see what we have created as problematic, but those problems have more to do with individual differences.
>
> I get to work with clients [here] in a way that is much more satisfying than my work with housing co-ops. In my other jobs, my contact with a client was often minimal - in some cases I didn't even meet them. In this job, I get very involved with my clients and our relationship can spread over several years. I get frustrated sometimes with the lack of progress and the lack of movement, but overall I would choose this sort of work over my previous work.

Bob says that the founding group 'completely underestimated' the problems that the Agency would encounter.

> The group that started this place can only be described as idealistic. They seemed to completely overlook the fact that Newham contained some of London's worst social and economic

problems. For a lot of people here, the issues have to do with housing, food and survival. Starting a business of their own is not really on the agenda, but nonetheless they have found their way here. The initial approach seemed to be to take everyone in, regardless of their situation. I think that making choices about how to screen prospective clients has been one of our biggest hurdles, and an area where we have never had a consensus. I think that you can trace a lot of our problems to the fact that workers have often found themselves in the situation of social worker rather than co-op development worker. For some, that has probably been at odds with what they imagined themselves doing. Since I have been here, I have seen some people burn out or become totally frustrated with what they have had to confront in their work.

I think you will find that Anne and I have responded to this problem in different ways. As I said, I try to weed out those people who I think are not ready to start a business, whereas Anne is more likely to work with people who require a lot of personal development and confidence-building.

Anne, who by 1986 had been with the Agency for three years, works twenty-four hours a week and has another part-time job as a second language teacher. On most weeks, Anne is at the Agency Monday through Wednesday. She is a soft-spoken, mild-mannered woman in her late thirties, and has a warm, friendly disposition. At the same time, though, she is fully able to assert herself and is not hesitant to express her opinion. In addition to her two jobs, Anne is also a mother, an animal rights activist and a participant in the women's movement. She lives in Newham and rides a bicycle to work each day. Anne subscribes to a vegan diet, but says that she 'allows' herself one cup of coffee a day, which she usually takes shortly after she arrives in the morning. This coffee 'ritual' proved to be the best time to find Anne in a relaxed mood and open to informal conversation.

Anne's reasons for working at the Agency appear to be more politically motivated than Bob's. She describes herself as 'vehemently anti-Thatcher', and a socialist with a commitment to a different and better Britain. For Anne, a better Britain would be based on a

socialist economic system, and include the development of a very large co-operative sector. Newham CDA, in her mind, gives her the opportunity to work toward this goal. Anne interprets the work of the Agency in quite broad terms, and includes social development as part of its mandate. She is less concerned than Bob with the fact that many people find their way to the Agency who are not ready to embark on a co-op business, and she is content working with people who are in a stage that she refers to as 'pre-co-op development'.

Like Bob, Anne characterizes NCDA as having had a lot of problems, and she talks of former staff not living up to her expectations. She traces the source of these problems to the fact that over the years people have been hired who have had quite different perceptions about both the work of the Agency and about the nature of collective management.

> Some people have come here to work expecting instant success, and in my view haven't approached things realistically. Getting a co-op business off the ground is a difficult task and takes a lot of time, maybe years. For some groups, it can take-off quickly and everything can come together quickly, but that is not the norm. Many of the people that we come into contact with are at the very early stages of getting their lives in order and we have to help them through that process. If you tell them to get a business plan organized as the first step, it isn't going to work. I think that some people we have hired have had a lot of difficulty in dealing with all of that. Over the years, some people have argued that we should merely refer people to other agencies and services if they are not immediately ready to get a business going - I think that is wrong. These kinds of tensions, I think, have been very hard on some people, and very hard on all of us. As you can see, Bob and I have approached this issue in different ways.
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> [Workers] have arrived with very different ideas about what a collective is. I think it is fair to say that some people have viewed a collective pretty loosely as a place where you don't have to work very hard, or where you don't have to worry much about being supervised. We have argued for more rules and for less rules, and I don't know what the answer is. Right now, I am in favour of more rules.
>
> Overall, I think the biggest issue that we have faced has not been

about rules, but about commitment. I don't think we have been able to establish a common ground here.

Anne says that she likes the great freedom afforded by an organization like NCDA. She indicates that she likes being able to make up time if she has problems with such things as child care, and enjoys the freedom to create her own schedule of work activities. Nevertheless she says, this same individual freedom requires a great deal of co-operation and mutual trust in order not to cause problems in the group. In her opinion, this requisite level of co-operation and trust has not always been present at Newham, and she cites a couple of examples to make her point.

> What do you do with people who always put their own needs first? Over the years, we have had people who, in my opinion, have abused their individual freedom. We had a worker once who was virtually never here - always with good excuses, but never giving us any sense that her problems were temporary. If she wasn't sick, her car had broken-down; if her car was ok, her mother was ill; if her mother was feeling better, then she would have some other excuse for not being at a meeting, or for not showing up. I fear we are getting into a similar situation with Lucia.

Bob and Anne come together in feeling over-worked and unappreciated. They suggest that the recent staff shortages, combined with the fact that the other remaining worker, Toyin, had been on an extended maternity leave, have meant that they have had do everything, and both of them talk of being tired and stressed. Compounding these problems is what both Anne and Bob talk of as a 'soured relationship' with the planning committee. The events of the recent past, according to Bob, have put them into 'an unnecessarily defensive position with the planning committee', who in his view, 'have failed to grasp what actually happened and want someone to blame'. Anne expresses a similar view, and suggests that her relationship with the planning committee has

'deteriorated', although more than Bob she describes the relationship as 'retrievable'. I came to learn, though, that Bob's less optimistic perspective was probably linked to the fact that the planning committee had requested a full report from him relative to the worker who has instigated industrial action against the Agency. Bob says, 'the planning committee has singled me out', and that this is 'highly inappropriate'. In response, he initiated a grievance with the planning committee, even though no formal route exists for such an action.

Bob and Anne also find agreement in characterizing NCDA as having a stormy past in which there has often been confusion and even conflict over goals, and where workers have had difficulty in getting along. Both of them appear to have reached the conclusion, by late 1986, that the best way to resolve these issues is to establish clearer guidelines and expectations for individual behaviour and organizational goals. Bob, more than Anne, appears to favour what might be termed an 'internal constitution'.

Newer workers, however, have come to the organization without knowledge of the 'troubled' past for reference. Predictably, these people arrive with a different set of expectations and preconceptions about the nature of the organization.

Lucia, Moses, Cathy and myself were all new to the staff group, reflecting the turnover and recent staff additions. We all began our employment within a week of one another during the first two weeks of October 1986. In keeping with the recruiting and selecting policies at NCDA, we were hired more for our differences than our similarities. In addition, the decision to institute a more specialized approach to work

activities meant that we were all hired to carry out specific jobs and tasks.

Lucia and Moses are both fairly recent immigrants to England, and both from former British colonies in Africa. I was also relatively new to England as a student from Canada. Cathy had arrived from the north of England to take up her job at NCDA. Moses and Lucia are black; Cathy and I are white. All of us, at the time we were hired, were in our thirties; I was the oldest, nearly forty at the time. Lucia and Cathy had been hired as permanent staff - Lucia to work with black groups in the borough, and Cathy to assume the role of office administrator. Moses and I had been hired on short term contracts, reflecting the organization's experiment with special project assignments. Moses had a six month contract to research the sources of funding for start-up co-ops, and I was hired to prepare a package of training programmes. We all found our way to the organization via a newspaper advertisement.

Bringing us together as a group was our 'newness', and we no doubt shared some of the insecurities that accompany the first few weeks on a new job. Very soon after arriving, we all became aware that the Agency had experienced some difficult times in the period preceding our employment, and this further defined us a group. Aside from these commonalities, though, each of us seemed to adapt to our situation by attempting to find an individual, rather than a collective, niche.

Lucia is a jolly woman and usually has a warm smile. Her clothes are almost always interesting, as she combines colours and styles in an unusually imaginative way. She obviously likes to look pretty and on most occasions achieves her goal, in spite of what she calls, 'my

ongoing problems with food'. In 1986, she is new to both England and to the co-operative sector. English, her second language, is one she is still learning.

Bob told me that Lucia was the interviewing panel's second choice, but that she was hired when the more desirable candidate turned down the job offer. As a result, Lucia was hired without all of the skills thought to be necessary for her role as a co-operative development worker for black groups in the borough. For these reasons, Lucia was hired 'on probation' to see how quickly she could pick up the necessary skills her job would entail.

Lucia's arrival at Newham coincided with considerable change and disruption in her personal life, not the least of which was a marital breakdown and problems in finding adequate child care arrangements. These personal matters seemed to preoccupy her during her first few months on the job, and it would be fair to say that she was on site only about half of her contracted hours. As a result, I did not have many opportunities to talk individually with Lucia until after Christmas, when some of her personal problems seemed more resolved and she was on site more often.

Lucia told me that me that she was quite desperate for a job by the time she was hired by NCDA. She said that her primary reason for taking the job was the fact that it was a job, adding that she was also happy to find employment in which she could work within the black community.

In conversation, Lucia does not have strong views about how the organization should or should not operate. She indicates that 'it is nice not to have a boss', but beyond that, she is unclear about the

benefits or advantages of working in a collective. On some issues, though, she has very strong views, particularly around racism. Lucia has had first hand experience with the disadvantage of being black and a new immigrant in English society. To make her point, she recalls a situation in which some white youths once yelled at her to 'go home', and talks about her problems in finding housing with white landlords. Lucia, as we will see when I talk about the negotiation and decision making processes, has sometimes figured at the centre of tension to do with individual freedom versus group and organizational needs. Particularly in the early period of her employment, Lucia was frequently absent or late for meetings, often cancelled appointments at the last minute, and was generally unavailable. It was my view that Lucia's behaviour acted as a powerful symbol of the need being expressed by Anne and Bob for clear-cut rules to limit the freedom of individual members of the group.

Cathy seems a less outgoing person than Lucia, both in personality and dress. In early conversations with me, she was quiet and cautious, although warm and friendly. Cathy was hired as office co-ordinator, a new job at the Agency which amalgamated many of the tasks that had previously been rotated among all the workers. Her contract was for three days a week and usually she could be found on site from Tuesday through Thursday.

Cathy arrived at the Agency with a lot of experience in the co-op sector. Her previous employer had been a co-operative support agency in the north of England, where she was a co-op development worker. She sees herself as a 'northerner', and expressed on a number of occasions

her desire to return to the north, seeing her time in London as temporary. Once I got to know Cathy, she told me that her previous job had not worked out very well, and that in fact, she had been 'let go'. She attributed this in part to a personality conflict with the 'manager'. As a result, perhaps, she indicated that she was attracted to NCDA because it was managed by the workers. Her previous work experience had also convinced her that she did not want to work directly with clients, and she indicated that she was drawn to the NCDA job because it offered the opportunity to work in a co-op support agency without the requirement to undertake development work with clients. Cathy, like Anne, describes herself as a 'committed socialist', with a vision of a very much expanded co-operative sector in the British socio-economic system.

Moses and I shared an office space outside of the main open area. Moses is a short, stocky, black man with a good sense of humour, although his jokes can occasionally be a bit 'off-colour'. As with Lucia, he told me that his primary reason for working at NCDA was because it was a job.

> I suppose it is a job, in the first instance, isn't it? This place pays well and that's something in a region of high unemployment.

Moses' contract requires him to work twenty-six hours a week. He is unhappy about this arrangement, and finds that this does not provide him with sufficient money on which to support his wife and child. He told me that he felt completely justified in spending some of his work time looking for another job because of the lack of job security provided by the Agency.

Before taking the job at Newham, Moses was unemployed, and before

that he was employed as an small business economic advisor with the Greater London Council. When the GLC was dismantled by the Thatcher government, he found himself on the street, and NCDA was the first job offer he had received after nearly a year on the dole. He says that the fact that it was a co-operative support agency, and that it was managed by workers, were not very important to him in arriving at his decision to accept the job offer.

> To tell you the truth, I am not very convinced that the idea of worker co-operatives is a good one. I find it hard to believe that anyone would really want to start a small business without hoping to make quite a bit of money. If you are the owner then all your hard work can end up making you a profit; if you are in a co-operative what is the incentive? I think a lot of small business people start with the idea that once they are successful, they can be sold for a good profit - if you decide to leave a co-op, you don't get anything.
>
> Don't you think that this idea of workers managing themselves is idealistic? I think that lots of people want guidance from others. Collectives have too much difficulty in dealing with each other and get bogged down in personality issues.

Moses' ambivalence about co-operatives and collective management may provide clues to the role he often assumed in the group. Although not always negative, Moses could usually be relied upon to take the position of devil's advocate in debates about client groups and issues to do with our self-management.

As these profiles of the six workers suggest, Newham CDA, particularly in the last round of hiring, has placed considerable importance on the diversity of people hired to work in the organization. The group, therefore, is distinguished by differences rather than similarities, and this characteristic influences almost all aspects of life in the organization. Further separating individuals is the shift to specialized jobs for each worker.

6.5 The Organization of the Work

As I have already indicated, each worker at the Agency has a particular area of responsibility and a fairly clear job to do. Bob, Anne and Lucia are all called 'co-operative development workers', but carry out their work in different ways, reflecting their perceptual differences about the nature of working with clients. As a starting point in understanding the work activities of the Agency, it is helpful to acquire an overview of the client constituency. Individuals and groups become clients of the Agency in a variety of ways. Some arrive at the door; others make phone contact; some come along with a friend who is already a client; others are referred by community organizations; and still others are established by out-reach and publicity programmes that make contact with particular segments of the population. A monthly 'Introduction to Co-ops' training session is the first service that is offered to walk-ins and phone callers. During these sessions, prospective co-operators are given an overview of what a worker co-operative is all about, along with an outline of the necessary steps in creating such a business. At the end of the session an appointment is made with one of the co-op development workers for those groups that wish to go further.

Individual clients have a variety of backgrounds and vary considerably by ethnicity, race, education and sex. Most are under 35 years of age and many have been unemployed for long periods of their adult life. Clients often feel desperate and would like everything organized and set-up in a short time so that they can begin to realize an income. Very few have personal money to get a business going; the

majority have no business experience, many have only the vaguest notion of what a worker co-operative is about, and only a minority have thought through a business idea beyond a general idea such as starting a restaurant. Many arrive thinking that NCDA is able to give them substantial financial help (which is very much not the case).

Many clients are thought 'unreliable' by NCDA staff, and with some justification. Clients give up and just disappear; others get a job and postpone their idea of business independence; many cannot wait the year or more that it may take before a business gets off the ground; friendships that seemed sound crumble under the strain of starting a business. Countering these disappointments, there are a number of success stories. For example, one client group of four women runs a worker co-operative travel agency with a very high volume of business; a 'mobile' daycare workers co-operative cannot keep up with the demand for its services. But in the main, working with clients is described by staff members as 'hard work, difficult and discouraging', and the three workers who have the majority of client contact like to pace their direct contact time with periods of not seeing clients. Bob typified these feelings in one of his remarks:

> These people place so much hope in all this - I think falsely in many cases - that I am constantly trying to keep them down on the ground and forcing people to be realistic. It is a thin line between keeping them focused on the realities of the business world and trying not to totally dampen their enthusiasm. You can burn out in this kind of work rather quickly.

Bob's approach to working with clients reflects his view that some other agency or social service group should be dealing with people needing extensive personal, career and financial counselling. Bob has

been in the co-op sector for a long time and has many sad stories of good ideas gone sour as a result of what he calls, 'lack of reality'.

Bob works mainly with men, not by design he says, but rather that it is just the way it works out. He usually has about eight client groups that are in his 'active' file, and several other groups that require little of his time either because they are successful or because they are in some way inactive. Bob says he likes them to be 'real go-getters'. He rarely goes out to a client group; instead he meets with them by appointment in the office. In the initial stages he focuses on the creation of a viable business plan and has prepared a computer programme that standardizes this task and has the added advantage of promoting computer literacy with his clients. He sees the business plan as the most effective way of getting clients to 'realize what they are getting themselves into'. Once a business plan is organized to his satisfaction (which may take five or six months), he concentrates on funding, locating premises, and teaching general business skills such as accounting. He is an 'encyclopedia' of knowledge about where to get money for business development, often knowing where there is a thousand pounds 'if you know the right bureaucrat'. Once one of his co-ops is trading he likes to 'let them get on with it'. He readily admits liking the front end of development work, and disliking follow-up and long term consulting.

Two client groups who were involved with Bob at the time of my research illustrate his approach. The first group was made up of four men who were in the process of setting up a workers co-operative that would offer consulting and repair services to businesses using complex

electronic equipment. The members of this group had former training in this area and a couple of them had worked in similar roles in previous jobs. Bob was really keen and excited about this group, and thought that their idea could well translate into a viable business. Members of this group were computer literate and were able, with Bob's help, to prepare a sophisticated business plan in just over a month. The main snag in their plan was a shortage of start-up money, and in this way they were similar to nearly every other group coming through the Agency.

Once the group had a business plan that Bob felt was 'marketable', he turned his attention to funding. As Bob told me, finding money for co-ops is a complex and often disappointing endeavour. There are several sources of funding for small businesses, but it seems that caution is needed when presenting an application, since most of the people in funding agencies who process applications view co-ops with considerable suspicion. To circumvent such people, Bob has established contacts with more sympathetic staff, and directs a business plan and proposal directly to these people. In the case of the electronics group, Bob decided to approach the borough Council itself, in an effort to obtain money from a special fund created for 'exceptionally promising' start-up worker co-operatives. Here again, Bob has a personal relationship with the person directly involved, and preceded the application with a telephone call and word of support.

Another group that Bob was working with, however, received a rather different response. This group of two men appeared at one of the 'introduction to co-ops' training sessions and had a business idea that involved bringing the green-grocer to the consumer. They had a vision

of themselves in a horse-drawn wagon full of vegetables plying the more prosperous residential streets of Newham. Bob told me that he was not convinced that the idea was viable, but rather than dampen the enthusiasm of the two men involved, he agreed to help them prepare a business plan. Bob could not understand why the younger of the men was the only one using his computer programme, until he discovered that the older man was illiterate. This information, combined with the doubts he had about the viability of the entire idea, probably contributed to his decision to put the group on what he called 'hold'. Once in this category, the two men were more or less ignored and eventually disappeared from the Agency.

Anne, as we have already seen, interprets the role of co-op development worker in quite a different way from that of Bob. In the initial stages of her work with clients, she is less concerned with business ideas and more concerned with her clients as people. Anne picks up most of the clients that are referred from social service agencies, and acquires other clients by actively going into the community to reach people who might otherwise not find their way to NCDA. She works mainly with women and often spends a lot of time in what she calls 'confidence building'. Given the socio-economic make-up of the Newham area, many of her clients are immigrants and/or unemployed. In the beginning, the majority of these women are unfamiliar with any form of business, and most have children and other 'gender obligations' that mean they have limited time to work on setting up a co-op and gaining 'marketable' skills. Anne appreciates these problems and often works patiently with a group for three or four hours

a week over a period of a year before they get around to discussing a business plan. In the majority of cases, Anne meets with clients on their turf, which may mean a private residence, a community centre or a cafe.

I went along with Anne on one of her visits to a group she called 'the knitters'. Anne had acquired this group of six women through her contacts with a community agency called 'Shalom', and we met with the knitters in a converted church used as a meeting place by Shalom. It was a lively place, with a child-care centre, a kitchen, several meeting rooms and a number of open-space work areas where people were knitting, sewing, weaving, doing carpentry, and having English language classes. The group of knitters were waiting for Anne and welcomed her with obvious signs of warmth and caring. Everyone in the group was female and had South Asian origins. They seemed a little surprised to see me - a male - but welcomed me into their group. A couple of the women could not speak English, so our conversations were lengthened by the need for ongoing translation.

Anne had been working with them for over a year, and had spent this time talking to them about their hopes and fears to do with living in a new country. It emerged early in her conversations with the group that they had never worked outside of their homes, that they had many fears about breaking their cultural norms about women not working, and that the only skill they all possessed, besides child care and domestic talents, was knitting. Over the course of several months, Anne counselled around these fears, and finally an idea surfaced that seemed to accommodate their particular set of needs and talents. The idea was

to operate as an at-home craft industry, knitting custom-made sweaters.

Anne told me that she expected it would be a few more months before the idea was translated into a business plan. She had a strong sense of what the group needed to do - undertake market research, make their service known to boutiques, develop a promotional strategy, and the like - but was determined to go slow. In Anne's view, her role with the group was to counsel and build confidence rather than offer expert advice or push the group too quickly.

Lucia's title was also that of co-operative development worker. She was hired to work thirty hours a week with ethnic and black client groups - a new role designed to meet the specific needs of a significant portion of the Newham constituency. For a variety of reasons including her personal problems and lack of experience, Lucia had almost no client contact during the first few months of her employment. During this time, she tagged along with Bob and Anne, observing their work activities. It was obvious that she preferred Anne's approach and spent most of her time with Anne. Bob did make several attempts to teach Lucia the computer packages he had prepared, but gave up once it became clear that Lucia had only a marginal interest in and aptitude for these programmes.

As time went on, though, Lucia made some decisions of her own about how she would service clients. As a starting point, she made contact with existing black community groups, attending meetings and other events, although by the time I left the organization no client groups had emerged from these activities. Because Anne and Bob felt overworked, they were anxious to pass along some clients to Lucia, even

though these clients were not necessarily black. As a result, and with some reluctance, Lucia picked up one group that had been a co-operatively-run bookstore and cafe for years, but who were having problems and requested help from NCDA, and another group running a typing/secretarial service.

Cathy appeared to take to her new job with great enthusiasm. Her job was designed to include general office administration, including bookkeeping, paying bills, banking and answering the phone. Her job description specifically does not include secretarial work such as typing for other people. Cathy, however, seemed to want a more rounded role and gradually carved-out some additional areas of responsibility. By the time I left, she was undertaking some public relations work, going out to speak to children and community groups about worker co-operatives. In addition, Cathy's general interest in the co-operative movement meant that she willingly assumed the job of representing the Agency on a number of related external associations such as the Industrial Common Ownership Movement.

As I indicated earlier, I was one of two people hired to undertake special projects. Moses had been hired to research the various sources of funding for start-up co-ops, and I had been hired to develop curricula for a number of short courses that development workers could use with clients, on such topics as marketing, budgeting, bookkeeping, and assertiveness. Moses and I held in common a feeling that we were not full members of the organization and that our views and opinions were less influential than those of permanent workers. Although we both attended collective meetings and were free to voice our opinions, there

was an unavoidable sense that we would not have to live with any decisions, and this made us 'different'.

While everyone at the Agency has a special role that occupies the bulk of their work time, there are still many jobs and tasks that do not fit into this work allocation. These are jobs that have to do with the general management and running of the Agency, jobs such as liaising with the management committee, recruiting and instructing clients through the introductory sessions, preparing annual reports, housekeeping (cleaning, doing the dishes, etc.), answering the telephone when Cathy is not in the office, and closing up. These jobs are a constant source of irritation to workers and are not allocated in any systematic way. In the main, they surface as 'problems' at the weekly collective meeting and either wait on volunteers or get dealt with through the introduction of rules (for example, recording in the minutes that the last person to leave is responsible for locking up the building and turning off the machines). The lack of 'spontaneous' co-operation evident in the way these tasks are handled, returns us to some of the problems with the decision making and negotiating processes of the organization.

6.6 Decision making, Conflict and Integration

As might be expected, given the personnel disruptions of the past, the introduction of four new people into a work group of six and a change in work routines, the initial period of my employment was characterized by high anxiety and stress for everyone. Bob and Anne had been through what they called 'a bad time' and the four new people, including myself, were uncertain and unsure of the culture and the

degree to which it might be negotiable. On one level, there was a strong sense that everything could be altered and changed, since we had all been hired with the understanding that the work group was collectively managed and that we would be equal partners in making decisions. On another level, though, Bob and Anne seemed to have an articulated model for how the organization should operate, and often left little room for discussion. Especially in the beginning, their style was to present operational policies as faits accomplis.

Further complicating matters was the fact that Lucia was in the midst of considerable personal change and was preoccupied with her domestic situation - a preoccupation that meant she was very often absent from work because of illness and unpredictable family demands. Even for Bob and Anne, there appeared to be no previously established route for satisfactorily dealing with such matters. Lucia's absences from work seemed to have the effect of evoking, for Bob and Anne, a bleak and discouraging sense of deja vu. One assumption they seemed to bring forward from their past experience was that individuals could and would abuse the freedom inherent in the collective structure. Lucia's behaviour had the effect of demonstrating that this assumption was still valid.

My research and employment with the Agency, therefore, coincided with a new but troubled start. Bob and Anne were tired - close to burnt out, they said. Not surprisingly, they gave every indication of hoping to resolve all the problems of the Agency as quickly and efficiently as possible, and their behaviour and actions suggested that they favoured one particular strategy. This strategy involved the introduction and

solidification of rules and monitoring procedures for individual workers. In addition, as I will soon illustrate, Bob and Anne appeared anxious to delegate some of the work activities they had taken on earlier as a result of the reduced number of workers on staff prior to the new hiring.

At the same time, newer workers appeared to have a different agenda. Moses and Lucia, by their behaviour in the first few months, seemed more interested in determining how far the acceptable boundaries of individual freedom could be stretched. Cathy seemed intent on creating and refining the administrative systems, rather than entering into discussion about how individuals should or should not behave. As for myself, I was anxious not to figure at the centre of any controversy.

My first couple of months with the organization was characterized by a negotiation process that seemed to be conflictual and unsettling. Group consensus seemed a distant, perhaps unachievable, goal. Everyone seemed cautious and reluctant to engage with each other. A couple of incidents stand out as illustrative of this period.

As I noted earlier, on my first day with the organization, Bob announced to me that I should keep time-sheets and record my work activities. On a similar theme, during the first few weeks at our collective meetings, Bob and Anne made a number of other announcements regarding personnel policies. In week two, Anne proclaimed that everyone should make an oral report at the beginning of the meetings about how they had spent their week, with a tone suggesting the item was not open for debate. Bob followed on Anne's remark by indicating that

these oral reports should be supplemented by written documentation about hours worked, and should include an indication of hours being carried over to another week, as well as an indication of any time that had been used as sick leave or vacation entitlement. Bob asked everyone to put this in writing and submit it to Cathy for payroll purposes.

In week three, a new set of announcements was made at the workers' meeting. Just as Lucia arrived, half an hour late for the meeting, Anne announced that lateness would be recorded in the meeting book, and that everyone needed to note that the meetings began promptly at 10am. At the same meeting, Bob announced that everyone should record their comings and going, including outside meetings and activities, in the large blue book (pointing to the edge of Cathy's desk).

These announcements seemed strange to me, and in contrast to other items on the meeting agenda that were dealt with as open discussions, albeit with newer members having less to say than Anne or Bob. These proclamations were also interpreted by other new staff as odd. In the office I shared with Moses, after these meetings, Moses was inclined to laugh-off the announcements, saying that Bob and Anne did not have as much power as they imagined. During a moment when no one else was around, Cathy commented, 'They're trying to create a real little bureaucracy around here, aren't they?'

As time went on, I noticed that not everyone was complying with the 'rules' as laid-down by Bob and Anne. Although I diligently filled in my time sheets and carefully recorded my whereabouts in the blue book, I took note that Lucia and Moses were not doing the same. I also noticed that Lucia was consistently late for meetings and absent a great deal of

the time, but that no action was taken beyond an entry in the minutes of the workers' meeting. Often Lucia arrived for meetings after we had each given our oral reports, and as a result we almost never formally heard about her activities. How, I wondered, was all of this going to be dealt with? Or, I wondered, will it be dealt with at all?

In the fourth meeting, Anne told us that she was absolutely overworked and could not go on the way she had been for the past two years. She said that something had to be done to reduce her responsibilities and to equalize the workloads, calling for the scheduling of several additional meetings to deal specifically with this problem. Moses said that he didn't see how the issue had anything to do with him, Cathy and I remained silent, and Lucia said she didn't think that she would be able to schedule any more meetings. Bob said, 'I completely support Anne - there is no way we are going to repeat the situation we had in the past'. Anne asked everyone to get their diaries so that we could schedule some add-on meetings. Moses reiterated his point that his job was clear-cut and that there were no other jobs in the organization that he had been contracted to undertake, adding, 'I won't be attending any of those meetings'. Lucia said she didn't know where her diary was, Anne began to cry, and I felt paralyzed by the tension. Cathy suggested that we take a fifteen minute recess.

By the time we returned to the meeting, everyone, including Lucia, had their diary in hand, and a series of meetings was established to deal with work allocation - meetings that everyone agreed, on reflection, did not need to include either myself or Moses. This was an issue, we agreed, that primarily involved the permanent staff.

This meeting seemed to represent the beginning of a turning point for the interpersonal relationships in the group. Five weeks had passed, and Anne's behaviour was the first open acknowledgement that someone was hurting, even though this had been obvious in many other subtle ways beforehand. After the meeting, Moses suspended his usual joking manner and expressed concern for Anne and Bob, saying, 'I guess things have been pretty rough for them'.

In our next meeting, another controversial issue was raised. Lucia indicated that she felt there should be some area set aside for smokers. Bob said that there was a rule, endorsed by the planning committee, that the NCDA offices were to be a 'no smoking' zone. Unlike the announcement of rules to do with reporting work activities, though, this one received an open challenge. Lucia requested that Bob provide a diagram of the formal boundaries of the Agency, adding that she was prepared to smoke in the stairwell. Cathy interrupted by saying that she also wanted a place to smoke and that some of the rules needed to be adjusted to meet the needs of new staff. I too felt I could risk being part of a controversial issue, and although I was trying to quit smoking at the time, I indicated my support for the smokers. Anne, prefacing a suggestion with a comment to the effect that she abhorred smoking, recommended that a small, unused room outside the main office area be designated an 'unofficial' smoking room, to which Bob responded by saying that if he had to go near the room he'd be ill, but that it would be possible for him never to go near the place. The absence of any further discussion signalled a consensus - everyone in their own way could live with the idea and reality of a designated smoking area.

While the smoking example might appear trivial, for this group, at this juncture, it was important. It provided evidence that a controversial issue - one to which everyone had a personal attachment - could be resolved through discussion.

In spite of a gradual opening-up and some positive experiences with the negotiation process, conflict over work hours, workloads, time-sheets and the like continued unresolved. As time went by, and I got to know the group better, I was able to acquire a better understanding of the ways in which people were interpreting and responding to these dilemmas. In this regard, the post-November period proved to be formative. In early December, Cathy initiated a discussion about vacation plans, indicating that she would need to record our holiday absences in the payroll register. This turned out to be a sensitive issue, first because there was no clearly established system for figuring out how much paid Christmas vacation people should have relative to the number of hours they worked, and second because three of the new staff (including me) wanted extended vacations over Christmas, necessitating the 'borrowing' of holiday entitlement. In some ways, what might have been a simple item turned out to be enormously complex - one in which everyone in the group had a vested interest. The item also acted symbolically for a broader set of issues to do with workplace absences in general - an area that by this time was quite electric for everyone. Our discussion took over two hours.

After a failed attempt to deal with the problem mathematically (that is, by trying to create a formula to standardize the Christmas vacation entitlement relative to the number of hours worked), we then

decided to do a round-robin of how much time we each wanted. Lucia and Moses, it turned out, had already booked flights to Africa and planned to be gone for a three week period. I was equally forthright in revealing that I had booked a two week return to Canada. Bob said that the Agency had been in the habit of closing a few days before Christmas and not opening until the New Year, but that it had never been clear if this was 'found' time. Cathy proposed that we each have a week of 'statutory' time and count any extra time away as vacation days. We agreed with this proposal, and although it still left two issues unresolved (how much vacation time did each person have, and what was our policy regarding 'borrowing' time?) we moved on to another item.

Two other important events took place in December. The first was the annual meeting of the co-op forum, and the second was a decision to have a Christmas lunch together. Throughout the autumn period, little mention had been made of either the planning committee or the co-op forum. Two meetings of the planning committee took place, but seemed to have only a minimal impact on the workers' group. Bob and Anne indicated that in the past, two workers had been assigned to attend each planning committee and that their role was to take minutes, provide information as requested, and then report back to the workers group. Bob attended one meeting and Anne attended the other, and their reports suggested that little of importance was happening at that level. On the other hand, we were told that each one of us was expected to attend the co-op forum in December.

The forum turned out to be great fun. Cathy organized an exercise designed to solicit ideas about the future of the Agency and, no doubt

helped by the beer and food, everyone seemed to have a good time. The only business part of the get-together involved the election of the planning committee for the next year.

The fact that the forum was fun and social seemed to be its biggest plus. By the end of the evening, people had split off into conversational groups, and interestingly, the workers' group formed one of these units. In this setting, Lucia provided some of the details about her personal problems; Cathy talked about her ambivalence towards London; Bob talked about his plans for a walking expedition in Scotland over Christmas; Moses talked about how exciting it would be to reconnect with this extended family in Zimbabwe; Anne talked about looking forward to a rest; and I talked about how much I was looking forward to my return visit to Canada, regardless of how cold it might be. During these conversations, we decided that we should all go out for a Christmas lunch. On my way home, I thought about how pleasant the evening had been and, at least to me, how important it was to know my co-workers on a personal basis. It was the first time I could recall seeing all of us smiling at the same time.

Our Christmas lunch had an ambience that was similar to the one we had enjoyed at the co-op forum. Moses proposed that we all make a wish for the next year. Among the cliched wishes that the next year get off to a good start, Bob said he felt more optimistic about the Agency, and Anne expressed her hope that we could get ourselves organized and running smoothly.

These two social events - the forum and the lunch - appeared to provide important shifts in how we perceived each other. While they had

in no way resolved the serious and conflictual issues to do with workloads and workplace behaviour that were still with us, they added a personal dimension that was to influence our negotiating processes in the next period.

My interpretation of these events as significant was shared by others. Anne and I had a conversation a few days before the Christmas break: she recounted a talk with her husband in which he suggested that she 'looked better'. She said that observation struck her as accurate: she did feel better and held out some hope for a more settled period in her worklife, referencing the new found intimacy in the group. Bob and I went for a drink around the same time and he too referred to a change in his attitude about the future of the group.

The first meeting of the workers' group in January, though, gave a sense that any progress we might have been making was at best tenuous. On the answerphone was a message from Moses indicating that his flight from Africa was delayed for a week, and a message from Lucia indicating that she had been called to jury duty and could not predict when she would be able to return to work. This turn of events not only resulted in a postponement of the day-long meeting that had been scheduled for the end of the week to deal with workloads, but seemed to cast a gloom over the meeting. Cathy, echoing my own suspicions, asked me after the meeting, 'Do you think they're lying?'

In some ways, then, some of the difficulties and conflict faced by NCDA before Christmas remained highly visible as the New Year began. Not surprisingly, a sense of malaise re-emerged as the dominant character of our ambience. During the weeks of January and February,

however, I had an opportunity to talk to my co-workers in a more intimate fashion, and I was able to reach a better understanding of how each person was interpreting the events of the previous few months.

One morning over coffee, Anne and I were alone in the office and she opened up a great deal.

> I don't think that we [meaning the Agency] have developed wholesome ways for dealing with our staff problems'. We have such a history of people not living up to other people's expectations. What's the solution? I really hate the idea of confrontation. It seems to me that Bob puts a lot of faith in establishing clear-cut rules, but I don't know if this will be effective unless the consequences of misbehaving are clear - who will act as the manager and enforcer? I am moving more and more toward Bob's view, but I do believe there is something deeper needed to get all of this to work. In order to get this sort of organization to work, you need something deeper.

I asked Anne what she meant by 'something deeper', and she used the term, 'common ground'. Although unable to articulate her idea precisely, she spoke with a passion that made it obvious that the notion of a common ground was very important to her sense of what a collective such as ours might require to be effective. She talked about it in almost spiritual terms.

> Common ground? I'm not sure why I used that term; it's the first thing that popped into my mind. It has something to do with values I guess - something about all starting from, or being in, the same place. For this type of organization to work, we need to share something more than office space. We need something more than the same salary. This may sound sort of odd, but I might compare it with a religion - we need some set of ideals or goals that bring us together as a group - something we all believe in or subscribe to. I see this sometimes in groups I work with - they really believe in the necessity of being together in order to improve their world. I'm not sure that we [NCDA] have ever been able to operate with that perspective - that we actually need to be together to achieve something we all want as a group. It has never been clear to me what holds us together.

As we talk, Anne wonders out loud if a lack of common ground may have contributed to the often very high amount of interpersonal conflict

she has observed, and continues to observe, in the organization. To make her point, she cited an example of one past worker deciding to 'withdraw' from the group. The worker resolved not to speak to anyone on staff, the culmination of a prolonged period of interpersonal conflict. This resolve led to a silence that lasted and became normalized for a period of nearly three months. During this time, communication between her and other members of the group was reduced to notes left discretely on the desk of other workers. Anne said she felt somehow punished, but there seemed to be no way to resolve the issue other than to wait it out. 'What do you do?', she said,

> when good will breaks down - this kind of organization deteriorates rather quickly if an individual really wants to act out their anger or personal agendas.

I also had an opportunity to catch Bob in a more philosophical frame of mind. Bob had registered with me several times before his conviction that most problems in the Agency could be traced to 'individual differences', and in conversation I asked him to say more about what he meant. 'Not everyone can handle this sort of freedom', he responded, and to illustrate his point, he told me:

> In my experience, not everyone can deal with a situation where they can set their own hours - some people will never put their worklife first. It is a tricky balance for an organization like ours - to what degree do you set standards for behaviour? I used to think that there should be no rules whatsoever; now I think that is naive. The reality is that some people will abuse freedom.
>
> Let me put it another way. You can operate on the principle that everyone will act in the organization's interest, or you can operate on the assumption that everyone will act in their own self-interest. I have shifted more and more to the latter view.

I asked Bob for a couple of examples of the sort of things that had contributed to shifting his perspective, and he recalled situations involving both his co-workers and clients.

> Lucia is not the first. We have always had these sorts of problems. Tell me, Gerry, what should we do when people don't show up? What do you do when you call a meeting and no one attends? What do you do when people lie? I didn't come here with the idea that keeping things like time-sheets would be necessary.
>
> A couple of people that used to work here did very little work - how do you deal with that unless you accumulate evidence? Lucia is not an isolated incident, we have had cases here where workers only put in about half of their paid time - the only way to confront that sort of behaviour has to be rational, and if nothing is in writing, then it tends to become purely emotional. I didn't start here wanting job descriptions and elaborate policies, but now I am convinced that we need those kind of rules and guidelines.
>
> I think that the same principles apply in working with clients. I will no longer work with people [clients] who are unable to make a commitment to attend meetings and do some work - basically I just ignore them.
>
> I have also encountered deceit. I had been working with one group for over a year before I realized that they weren't doing what they said they were doing. For this group, I had gone to the borough Council to obtain some money from a fund they created to help start-up co-ops. I put myself on the line by recommending these people. Anyway, it turned out that they were using this money for their personal use and had no intention of getting a business off the ground. The Agency had to take them to court - you can imagine how incompetent I looked. I am not going to get burnt again - people say one thing and do another.

Thinking of Anne's remarks, I asked Bob how he thought policies and rules should be enforced in an organization in which there were no supervisors with this sort of managerial authority and responsibility. Looking me straight in the eye, he said,

> People like you and me have to take that responsibility. A collective structure is not about abdication from the roles that managers usually take. Everyone has to become a manager.

Cathy and I also found some time to talk, and she told me she was 'discouraged and pissed-off'. 'Discouraged', she said, 'because all of this is beginning to seem hopeless, and pissed-off because people are so selfish'. 'Over Christmas', she told me, 'I started to look for a job up north'.

In spite of this bumpy start, during the period following the

Christmas holidays, once everyone was actually back on site, there were occasions when we seemed to be more integrated with a common view of how to better manage ourselves. A couple of events from the February-April period are illustrative.

In February, Bob announced that all new staff would have a performance appraisal, reflecting what he described as an Agency policy to conduct evaluations after three months of employment. He indicated that these appraisals had traditionally used a format whereby each person, including the person being evaluated, completed a written summary of comments and placed them in a file folder for subsequent discussion by the group. Each set of comments, he said, should be typed and submitted anonymously. Moses asked if Bob and Anne would also be appraised and they suggested that this would be a good idea, but at a future date once new staff evaluations were completed. Consequently, we scheduled a special workers' meeting to deal with performance appraisals.

Cathy went first and received very complementary comments from everyone, although in her own comments she indicated that she was unhappy with her job and living situation. She asked for and received approval to become more involved in public relations work, but her ambivalence about living in London was obviously not a problem that anyone else could redress.

My performance appraisal was also complementary, although I discovered that Lucia did not really know what I had been doing and we agreed to meet informally to talk about the courses I was putting together. The comments relating to Moses and Lucia, however, were very

mixed and, not surprisingly, became the subject of much discussion.

Comments on Moses expressed concerns about his lack of initiative, his dogmatic and aggressive attitude, and the high number of personal telephone calls he received at work. One of the anonymously written comments suggested that he might be 'sexist'. Moses responded to all of the written comments on the defensive, demanding that the individuals who had made the comments identify themselves. This information, however, was not forthcoming. Anne suggested that the comments were obviously of concern to at least one other worker in each case, and that it was important to 'hear' them, even if they did not resonate as exactly true. Attention then focused on the criticisms about lack of initiative. Surprisingly I thought, Moses agreed that he had been somewhat preoccupied with finding a full-time job and had perhaps not devoted as much time as he should have to his work at NCDA. He went on to suggest that the development workers (meaning Anne and Bob in particular), seemed never to have any time to spend with him to share their knowledge about the precise financial needs of their clients. A meeting was established to share this information.

Discussion then focused around the comment to do with sexism. Moses expressed disbelief that anyone could think that he was 'against women', and once again insisted that the person who had made the comment identify him or herself. After a difficult silence, I suggested that it was unfair to expect anyone to come forward, given his hostility and the sensitive nature of the issue, recommending that we have a general discussion about sexism. Reluctantly, Moses agreed to this suggestion and we entered into a debate about the nature and texture of sexism.

Lucia said that she believed there were differences in the way that black men and women perceived and dealt with gender inequality, but that public debate invariably used the perspective of white women. Cathy countered by citing situations in which Moses had 'touched' her in ways that felt sexually motivated, and that her discomfort had nothing to do with skin colour. Anne and I recalled times when certain jokes told by Moses presented women in a way that was compromised and inappropriate. Moses, looking rather overcome, asked if everyone might provide this type of feedback at the time a situation was occurring rather than after-the-fact, during an evaluation session. After the meeting, in our shared office, Moses wondered out loud, 'Do you think this has to do with a certain lesbian on staff who can't come out?'. Even in his search for an easy answer, though, he was obviously moved by the information he had received.

Comments for Lucia were gentler than I might have imagined. On the plus side, workers indicated that Lucia often brought a 'new and fresh perspective' to issues, and that she seemed deeply committed to the plight of under-privileged people in the borough. On the critical side, though, many of the concerns to do with Lucia's absences and tardiness had been put into writing for all to see. Typical of these comments were:

-Has not been here much since arriving

-Can she manage a thirty hour week?

-Is there a backlog of hours owing?

-When can she take on more clients?

-Lateness for some meetings - up to an hour.

Lucia's initial response was to say, 'I didn't know everybody thought this way - nobody told me they were upset with me'. Bob, in an uncharacteristic mood of sympathy, said,

> Lucia, I think we can all forgive and forget if you can reassure us that your problems are resolved. I think that the question we all need to have answered is, 'can you manage the thirty hour week, or do you need your time reduced?'

It was certainly a pertinent question from my perspective and, I believe, from everyone else's. Lucia answered Bob by saying that she could in fact honour her thirty hour a week contract, adding that any less time would mean she could not survive economically. Little more was said, and when Cathy suggested that Lucia's probationary period be extended another three months in order to give everyone time to work with her during a more settled period, everyone agreed.

The evaluations had the interesting effect of bringing us closer together as a group. Issues to do with tardiness, attendance and workload by no means disappeared at Newham, but the evaluation sessions had the effect of personalizing and individualizing them. It became a bit clearer for everyone what our norms were, and the various staff in the Agency seemed more agreed than before about the ill effects of exceeding what continued to be very wide margins for individual behaviour.

One other event was equally pivotal in bringing the group together - the preparation of a report to the borough Council. Historically, the Council had required an annual report of NCDA's activities as a condition of ongoing funding, and 1987 was to be no different. In March, Bob reported that his 'sources' in the Council had told him that money was extremely tight and that the Agency was on the agenda to be

axed. He suggested that we instantly turn our attention to the preparation of an impressive report to the Council and begin a process of lobbying, adding that everyone would need to be involved if the Agency was to be saved. Consequently, for the first time since I had arrived, there was a challenge confronting the group that was of equal importance to everyone. The prospect of unemployment held no appeal to anyone.

Bob, Anne and Cathy volunteered to spend a day putting together a plan of action that we would all review at the next workers' meeting. In their action plan they suggested that each person take responsibility for a section of the annual report, and that informal lunch meetings be set up with sympathetic Councillors and other influential people in the borough. Lucia suggested that she have the black groups she was working with write letters on behalf of the Agency, and Moses proposed that he make contact with some of his former GLC co-workers who were still active in the small business development field to write on the Agency's behalf. Lucia said that she felt she could not write as well as others and wondered if her time would be better spent gathering statistics about client activities.

During early March, everyone worked almost exclusively on jobs to do with promoting the Agency to the borough Council. The result was a twenty page report presenting the organization in the most favourable light possible, and the submission of several letters from clients and other groups complementing the work of the Agency in the most glowing terms. Near the end of March, word was received that NCDA would receive funding for another year. The group was ecstatic and we went out to

lunch to celebrate. It seemed to me that this event might be the sort of situation that workers would subsequently cite to illustrate just how co-operatively everyone could work.

After this success, life in the organization returned to our normal routine, but with the sense that an improved climate could be established. Lucia, by this time, was on site more often, albeit with fewer hours than contracted; in addition, she had acquired a couple of client groups from other workers. At her second performance assessment, the group felt that she had made sufficient improvement to have her probationary status removed. Moses successfully negotiated a renewal of his contract for a three month period, promising that this would be sufficient time for him to complete his report. He proposed that his contract be extended even further, suggesting that he would like to get involved with clients, but received little support for this idea.

6.7 Lasting Impressions

Issues to do with workload equality continued to be present and were by no means resolved or fully negotiated by the time I left in April. By this time, several meetings had been held that focused on work allocation and fairness, but no definitive way of dealing with this sensitive issue had materialized. One outcome of these meetings was the use of a large blackboard on which each client group was listed with notations about their progress and status, along with space for development workers to note the frequency and results of consultations. Nevertheless, Bob and Anne continued to feel that they were doing more work than Lucia, and that the workloads were unequal. At the same time,

Lucia continued to argue that her work with black groups was 'different' and necessitated a long-term commitment to attending meetings and other events organized by black community groups. The specialized nature of her work, she argued, precluded her from taking on any of the additional client groups that Anne and Bob seemed anxious to delegate to her. Bob and Anne's perception that they carried the bulk of responsibility for clients, accompanied by Lucia's perception that her work was 'different', continued to make the negotiation process probematic. The only tangible outcome of these different perceptions about workloads and work activities appeared to be the regularization of 'special meetings' to review the data on the blackboard.

Additionally, by the time I left in April, issues to do with individual behaviour remained unresolved, but seemed to focus less as a point of debate or conversation. In this regard, I could not help but notice that my own behaviour and attitude, as an employee, had changed over the six month period. I was no longer keeping time-sheets and much less conscientious about keeping the 'blue book' up-to-date. As well, I was more lax about my own coming and going. I had long since stopped worrying if my train was late, and usually left early to get a more convenient train back to Bath. The concerns that I felt at the beginning of my employment about my own promptness and attendance seemed to have given way to a more laissez-faire attitude. In addition, I realized that I was less concerned about the attendance or tardiness of my co-workers. As a researcher, I continued to find the activities of my co-workers fascinating, and continued to search for the attitudes and values that guided these actions, but I as an employee I had to admit

that I was less committed or dedicated than was my usual norm regarding my work. I worked away at my course outlines, but I could not help but observe in myself a strong inclination to put my personal needs ahead of my work. As I reflected back on the six month period I found myself thinking: I've 'taken-on' many aspects of the organizational culture at NCDA - I've changed.

In my diary, I recorded how much I liked the freedom and flexibility that life at NCDA afforded. At the same time, I noted how much I personally longed to be in a situation in which everyone felt more enthusiastic about their work and more committed to achieving a common goal. This group enthusiasm, I speculated, might be linked to the motivation I needed to get out of bed earlier and help to inject a greater sense of commitment into my work. I also wondered in my diary notes if my level of investment and commitment as an employee might have been different if I had been a full-time worker. Would I have fought harder for a more work-centred ethos? Would I have dealt differently with the issues to do with individual behaviour?

By the time my contract was about to expire, Bob and Anne's 'announcements' about rules and procedures were mostly absent from our meetings. Although these 'rules' continued to exist in principle, we seemed unprepared to deal with infractions. My sense was that we had created a norm that, unless someone overwhelmingly flaunted these 'rules', no specific action would be taken - and even then it might be unclear what form any action might take. In fact, the result of an individual not complying with this norm seemed as though it might have more impact on other workers than the individual directly involved.

Exceeding the norm seemed to have the effect of producing a sense of disappointment and resignation in others, rather than necessarily changing the behaviour of the individual 'deviant'. As I have already indicated, the performance appraisal meetings did have the effect of shifting our norms in this regard, but at the day-to-day level, the responsibility for 'good behaviour' continued to be largely an individual prerogative. And, as Anne wisely pointed-out, the motivation for good behaviour seemed to require, although not necessarily receive, something more than a rule.

Near the final days of my employment with NCDA, I thought: perhaps if I had arrived at a different point in the biography of the organization, my experience would have been quite different. At the same time, I wondered: would it have been so very different? On the one hand, my arrival during a troubled new start meant that I was part of a worker-managed organization with a culture that was being renegotiated, most noticeably it seemed to me, by our attempts to negotiate norms and acceptable ways of being together. On the other hand, many of my experiences and observations of worklife in the 1986-1987 period did seem evocative of what I had been told was a dominant characteristic of the organization's culture throughout much of its history. As I reflected on my experience, it seemed to me that the dominant theme over the entire course of my research had to do with finding a balance between individual freedom and the needs of the group, highlighted by debate to do with workloads, boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and organizational goals. Nevertheless, the various reports I received about the past suggested to me that this theme was not an

entirely new one for the organization. Assumptions that seemed to be in use during the late-1986 period, about the self-serving nature of individuals, had, by all reports, a counterpart in earlier stages of the organization's development.

In the introduction to the case, I described NCDA as a world of individuals, and I think that this is an accurate characterization of the organization. At the same time, however, my research also revealed that there were some issues and events which appeared to have the power to integrate the group and promote collective and co-operative responses. As my thesis moves into more analytical terrain, I believe it is important to keep this in mind.

Overall, I found my time at NCDA quite stressful and I was glad to leave the organization. Educative as it was to be part of a work group struggling with some of the key issues of our time (social, economic, racial and gender inequality), I found my status as a contract employee, without a long term commitment to the organization, often left me feeling helpless and frustrated. Nevertheless, as a research site, NCDA provided an excellent source of information about worker management. I think that my intense engagement with the organization (as an employee) was a valuable way to 'feel' data, and draw on my own experience as a participant. It is one thing to be a 'fly on the wall', but quite another to be a 'fly amongst flies'. Both have the power to teach and inform, but the experiential approach, I learned, provides a special dimension and depth to personal insight and learning.

As I left the organization, I found myself wondering whether NCDA was on a path to a more stable future. I had detected the beginnings of

a 'spirit of co-operativeness' in some activities, and I wondered if that spirit could be expanded and capitalized upon.

6.8 Update

A month after I officially left, I telephoned the Agency ostensibly on a matter to do with social security, but I was equally curious to know what was going on. It was a Wednesday just before noon, so I was confident that someone would be around. But I was wrong: I got the answerphone. Research has to formally end at some time, and for me, getting that answerphone somehow signalled the conclusion of the period in which I would actively gather data.

I wrote to NCDA from Canada, in the Spring of 1989, asking them for a brief update on what had occurred since my visits. Anne responded to my letter and told me that there had been virtually no change in the organization of the work. She wrote that Cathy had left the organization and had been replaced by someone they were calling, 'the finance worker'. She indicated that Moses had long since left the organization, and that a new worker had been added on a one-and-a-half year contract to work in that part of the Docklands that is in Newham. On a more personal note, she had this to say:

> Hi! How nice to see that familiar fountain pen signature after all this time. Things plod along in the Agency, and from my point of view, go from bad to worse. It's definitely time for me to go - but where? Getting out of co-op development is like climbing up a greased pole - but perhaps I don't try hard enough. At least it doesn't take up all of my life.
>
> Major reviews of work organization and allocation have taken place - partly by demand from funders and partly from our own internal needs. Internally, there have been problems to do with individuals not getting areas of their work done and quite a lot of absenteeism. This has been dealt with by a highly structured approach to work (my opinion).

Your training materials still sit neatly on a shelf in the office and occasionally get used - their time is coming however. In the autumn we are going to devote all our time to training.

I hope you are happy and moving on to new and exciting projects.

SECTION III

THE EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF A THESIS

This section considers the development of my learning on the 'inside' and on the 'outside'. By 'inside', I mean the intellectual and emotional growth that was occurring while I was completing the four ethnographies. By 'outside', I mean the learning that was occurring as I became more and more familiar with the literature.

In Chapter 7, I will outline a model of the general process of learning which suggests that learning takes place in cycles of action, reflection and feedback. I will then employ this model as a way of highlighting the insights that were taking place during my field work.

In Chapter 8, I will consult the literature that is concerned with the topic of worker self-management, in detail, locating in it three broad themes. One theme suggests that workgroups of this type cannot sustain themselves and will fail, or degenerate into traditional models of business organization. A second theme offers prescriptive advice to prevent degeneration. The third theme rejects, or at least side-steps, the deterministic bias of these conclusions and recommends an analysis that stresses the unique features of each co-operative management, with particular reference to cultural and social factors. Although I align myself with the latter school of thought, my own field work suggest to me that most of these researchers have failed to adequately account for the change and development patterns that seemed so characteristic of the organizations I visited.

As a result, I turn my attention to a more general literature on organizational theory, some of which addresses change and development in terms of organizational life-cycles. I find that this notion provides a conceptual map that most reflects my observations from the field. I conclude the chapter by referencing all the information I have collected, both from the field and from the literature.

CHAPTER 7

LEARNING FROM WITHIN WORKER-MANAGED ORGANIZATIONS

7.1 Learning About Learning

In this chapter, I will revisit the organizations, but this time much more personally. Each week and month of my fieldwork raised an increasing number of questions and puzzles in what I would characterize as a building block of confusion, insight and learning. Here, I will present a simple framework or model that I believe typifies these learning processes.

Many commentators have noted that learning involves an ongoing, cyclical process of action, reflection, making sense and communication. The observation that learning involves multiple stages is particularly applicable to naturalistic researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985:211), for example, have noted that:

> The steps of purposive sampling, inductive data analysis, development of grounded theory, and specification of next steps in an emergent design interact and are reiterated multiple times in the course of any particular investigation. Indeed, there is no end to an emergent design; it seems likely that any naturalistic investigation could be continued indefinitely, since it will continually dredge up new questions and insights worth pursuing.

John Rowan (1981) also notes this tendency and introduces the very helpful concept of 'cycling'. For Rowan, an inquiry inevitably passes through several research cycles, each of which may include the phases of being, thinking, project development, encountering, making sense and communicating. In this way, Rowan conceives of learning as layered - a building-block of confusions, questions, insights, new questions, new

puzzles and new insights, leading finally to communication with a wider audience.

John Rowan recommends that these research cycles should almost always occur in formalized collaboration with other people who share a commitment to the inquiry. In the research that I am reporting on here, I can readily identify a cycling process, but one that has been less formally contracted with other people than Rowan would suggest. In my learning process, I believe that cycling is a concept that characterized my personal and independent learning, rather than a formalized research programme that I went through with a demarcated or static group of people. I am, therefore, more comfortable with the term 'learning cycle' than with 'research cycle'. I am also of the view that naturalistic research entails even more chaos and confusion than Rowan and others have suggested. Their models, by reducing research to descriptive cycles or phases, lose some of the rawness and disorientation that I found to be commonplace in my inquiry.

Nevertheless, I have chosen the cycling metaphor as one that is evocative of my own research experience, and aids in making intelligible and authentic the learning process of my inquiry. In my research, I can identify five learning cycles. The first three took place during my field work and early reading of the literature, the fourth during an extensive review of the literature and comparisons with the data I collected, and a final cycle took place during my writing-up stage. In this chapter, I will deal with the first three cycles, recalling my field work and the issues and insights it generated. In Chapter 8, I outline my learning cycle that took place during a long engagement with

the scholarly literature. The final learning cycle in my project is outlined in the analytical Section (Chapters 9, 10 and 11).

7.2 Cycle One

My first learning cycle began when I became aware of wanting to know about organizations that were outside of my experience. I had reached a point in my life when I wondered if there might be alternatives to the bureaucratic and hierarchical workplaces that I had experienced. I was generally discontented with my work world, and in search of alternatives. I was curious to know what it would be like if the most obvious feature of my organizational reality - the formal hierarchy - was absent. My inquiry began with a personal attraction to the idea and optimistic belief in the possibility of co-operatively-managed organizations. Did any exist and if so, what were they like?

Some initial dabbling in the literature suggested to me that the sorts of organizations I sought to understand existed in substantial numbers in England, and that this would be an exciting base for my research. I designed a research project that addressed my inchoate plans and interests, and before long found myself located in England and ready to begin.

Shortly after I began my formal research programme, I was at the encounter phase with the architectural firm, Quattro Design. This experience was completely uplifting, with the staff at QD exuding enthusiasm for their way of working and describing their organizational culture in ways that spoke to their feelings of being proud and successful. Naturally, this reinforced an optimism that was a central

characteristic of my own thinking about worker self-management. After the encounter, I was full of questions and speculation about why they were so successful. I wondered if the qualities I had noticed at QD might be generalizable to other co-operative organizations. On the other hand, though, it seemed to me that QD had very little history, and I wondered if they would be able to sustain their way of doing things in the face of the growth that seemed imminent for them. I was curious about the impact that these forces might have on their organizational culture.

Full of questions and attempts to make sense of the encounter, I began to read the literature, curious to see what help it might give me in understanding Quattro Design. It soon became apparent to me that the literature had two main trends - an overwhelmingly pessimistic one and an unequivocally optimistic one. In the first tradition, worker-managed organizations were characterized as inevitably degenerating into bureaucratic forms or completely collapsing and failing economically. In the second tradition, this degenerative tendency was either side-stepped altogether in the analysis, or viewed as conditional. According to theorists in this latter camp, degeneration was avoidable if the organization met a number of conditions, such as limiting its growth by maintaining a provisional or transitory orientation (that is, winding-down the business rather than growing). On first inspection, the deterministic nature of both trends in the literature seemed to me inappropriate and not very helpful in understanding QD. For the architects, growth seemed like a challenge rather than a negative imperative, and a temporary or provisional orientation was far from what

I perceived to be a secret of their success. On the other hand, a few of the conditions cited in the literature, such as homogeneity of staff, did reflect aspects of QD that I had noticed and believed important.

Although the first lessons I took from the case-study literature on worker co-operatives generally did not confirm to my impressions of the architects, I found other, more general, ideas appealing and insightful. For example, I developed a sense of the levels of analysis that other researchers had found useful. There appeared to be a consensus amongst researchers that understanding co-operative organizations required an analysis of at least three things: the characteristics of individual members; the group processes; and the external forces having an impact on the organization. For almost all theorists who had rejected completely pessimistic views, there was an agreement that success had something to do with these three dimensions. While I found myself rejecting the ideas of those theorists who stated their views about these levels of analysis in a categorical and prescriptive way, I found myself thinking that the underlying ideas contributed to a useful conceptual map.

Overall, my early assessment of the literature pictured worker co-operatives as highly prone to failure, but my optimism remained intact and I was anxious to gather more information from the field. Turning away from reading and thinking, I devoted my attention to finding additional field sites to visit. Thus, I began a second learning cycle full of enthusiasm, emotionally attached to my impressions of QD as a successful model of worker self-management, and feeling rebellious against the matter-of-fact way in which the

literature seemed to deal with this type of workgroup. I was anxious to broaden my exposure to other groups, wondering whether QD's experience was typical or unusual.

7.3 Cycle Two

The next learning cycle in my inquiry began when I encountered three workgroups in Toronto - The Development Education Centre (DEC), The Body Politic Collective (TBP), and SCM Bookroom. I soon came to think of these three organizations as a group, in part because I was visiting them during the same period.

From the beginning, I noticed how different all the Toronto workgroups seemed from Quattro Design. I guessed that this was partly due to the fact that I was so intensively engaged with each group and therefore able to get a much more complete picture, but also, I speculated, because they had been in existence for a longer time and had much more history to report. I was most surprised at the amount of interpersonal conflict and tension that I observed, and by the degree to which conflict, argument and disagreement were taken for granted as 'normal'.

Unlike QD, individuals in the Toronto groups (particularly DEC and TBP) often dwelt, in interviews and discussions, on those occasions when people were not getting along and when the ethos seemed to be characterized by conflict. It was such a prevailing theme in conversations that early on I came to think of it as one of the major features of organizational life in these groups. Certainly, it was an observation that most workers wanted to share with me, and one of the

features that I highlighted in my own observational notes. Time and time again, I found myself recording moments when what appeared to me to be a minor problem or slight difference in personal styles seemed able to produce intense disagreements and arguments - sometimes resulting in co-workers not speaking to one another for a few days. I found these moments of conflict extremely uncomfortable - usually more uncomfortable than anyone else found them - and I came to see them as in some way indicators of organizational failure.

When I was witness to discontent, interpersonal conflict, gaps in co-operation, power struggles and inequality, I characteristically found myself sad, let-down, frustrated and occasionally angry. An excerpt from my diary during the time I was at The Body Politic collective is illustrative:

> It started to rain just as I left and I arrived at the collective meeting absolutely soaked. No one made any effort to acknowledge me - were they angry that I was late? Couldn't care less? The meeting seemed unusually tense. Rick was in the chair acting like an emperor, whisking everything through as though the only goal was speed. The central item on the agenda was how to structure the upcoming discussions to do with organizational evaluation and review. Rick started the discussion with: 'How many times have we done this and achieved nothing? I think the subgroups should prepare reports and then we can ratify or reject their reviews.' After a brief discussion (I felt that a number of people still had something to say), Rick summarized (noticeably, I thought, in his own version) and, with hardly a glance, assumed there was agreement and moved-on to the next agenda item. I knew that several people wanted the decision to be quite different because they had discussed it with me earlier that afternoon. Why were these people being so silent at the meeting?
>
> If I had been parachuted into the meeting without any notion of what kind of group it was, I would have thought that I was at a staff meeting with an extremely autocratic boss. I felt completely intimidated and devalued and I suspect that I was not alone. I found myself angry and disappointed. I wondered: why are they doing this? Given all this freedom and autonomy, why are they spending their time bickering and not resolving their conflict? Where's all the co-operation and equality?

The situation I have just described at TBP was not atypical. At DEC, workers recalled numerous times when interpersonal communication had deteriorated to the point that only a few people were speaking to one another. During these occasions, it was reported to be common that derogatory and anonymous notes would be left on each other's desks, phone messages not passed along, and absenteeism rife. At both DEC and TBP, I observed workers flatly refusing to help one another, often in a way that seemed rude. Casual conversations frequently became opportunities to discuss critically someone who was not present. By the same token, I did notice that there were times when workers would go out of their way to help and support each other (and this was particularly noticeable at SCM Bookroom), but in general, the force of the negative seemed much stronger and more pervasive to me.

Not long into my encounters with the Toronto groups, I became aware that I was personally very disappointed. I found myself giving less and less attention to what I thought of as positive moments and becoming more and more obsessed by and fixated on observations and events in which there was a lack of harmony and co-operation or when there was discontent and acrimony. I began to acquire a view of these negative experiences as the dominant tone of the organizations and felt myself becoming more and more angry and unhappy with what I was finding. Before long, I came to have what I conceptualized as the 'snake-pit' view of worker-managed organizations. I consciously fought against this view, but found it could not be willed away. In more analytical moments, I speculated that some of what I was observing had to do with the fact that my field visits coincided with a difficult period for each

of the groups - SCM was failing financially; DEC was in the throws of expansion and redevelopment; TBP was finding it difficult to survive financially and was reassessing the necessity of their continued existence - but this seemed too simple and incomplete an answer. For me, I began to realize, these organizational qualities and norms rubbed abrasively against my own preconceived notion about what co-operative working should be like. I began in earnest to try and understand more fully the nature of my preconceptions.

As I began to explore my confusion, disappointment and disillusionment, both in public and alone, I started to realize that the answer had to do with the way I had approached the entire study. I slowly came to the realization that my inquiry had not been as open and value-free as I had originally imagined. In my mind, I had merely wanted to find some co-operative organizations and see what they were like, and I imagined this to be possible. In this design, my mind would be an open vessel into which information would flow unencumbered and uncensored. With the benefit of experience and hindsight, I came to realize that I had entered the field with a 'hidden' bias and that I needed to expose and explore my personal 'mind set' if I was going to understand more fully co-operative working.

I had began my project with a model of the 'perfect' worker-managed organization. I imagined these workgroups to be exemplars of harmonious working relationships, equality and participatory democracy. My meaning system emphasized the interpersonal. Combined with this model was a number of exaggerated notions about bureaucracies, which characterized them as cold, hostile and tyrannically hierarchical -

notions which I was juxtaposing with my image of the perfect worker-managed enterprise.

On reflection, I began to understand that my early assessment of the Toronto groups - particularly DEC and TBP - stemmed from assumptions that I had brought into the research. My assumption that co-operative workplaces would be exemplary models of democratic behaviour, the opposite of the exaggerated bureaucratic forms I was rejecting, had been allowed to go unchallenged at Quattro Design. However, once I was engaged with what I perceived to be the lived realities of the Toronto groups and began to acquire an image of co-operative working as conflictual, stressful and unharmonious, my original assumptions were deeply challenged and confronted. My way of adapting was to create a second model - the snake-pit view - which proved to be based on an equally inappropriate set of assumptions. Both models failed to characterize or capture 'the way it was' for organizational participants themselves.

A turning point came when I shared my interpretations with friends and my academic supervisor, as well as with workers in the Toronto groups. Surprisingly, my impressions did not shock others, and in many cases workers agreed with my observations, but not with my interpretations. To most workers, the conflict and disagreement I was interpreting in wholly negative terms were relatively normal aspects of worklife and not something to warrant long-term upset. At TBP, Gerard reflected on my observations: 'It's just the way it is in co-ops - you get used to it', and Richard, at DEC, offered: 'There is less social veneer here, I guess it appears a bit raw from the outside'.

Explanations of this type, coupled with my own introspection, helped me to realize that some of what I had 'found' was my own 'presuppositional baggage'. Organizational participants did not feel they had to be 'perfect' by my definition or anyone else's. What I began to appreciate was that my needs had been forcing a meaning structure on the culture of the organizations that was different from the meanings used and legitimized by participants. In their view, the groups they belonged to were neither totally harmonious nor totally conflictual, but rather a combination of the two. Not only that, but organizational participants helped me to appreciate that personality and philosophy differences did not necessarily work against co-operation. Tim, at TBP, made this point when talking about Ken. Although Tim was open in describing Ken to be 'as cold as a fish', he also indicated that he could step back from that view and acknowledge Ken as a hard and intelligent worker. Tim told me that, when it came time to actually get the paper out, he and others were more concerned with the work-at-hand. If someone or some subgroup needed help, he said, 'You don't stop to decide if you like the person'. I had to acknowledge that this was my observation as well - getting the paper out had an orchestral quality about it.

Fortunately, the depth of interaction favoured by my ethnographic approach had allowed me to be open to and acknowledging of the experience of organizational participants as they described it, rather than merely as I experienced it. At the same time, my approach allowed for (and indeed encouraged) a revised and more pertinent set of questions that were based on the actual field-site experience. With the

benefit of the insights I was gaining in the field, I began to rethink the questions and puzzles that were guiding my inquiry.

Concurrent to my discovery that life inside co-operative workgroups was more complex than I had been assuming, my research perspective began to shift in several ways. I still wanted to know what these places were like at a descriptive level and to feel that I had sufficient information to present an authentic case study of each group, but I now had some larger and more complex questions.

I had learned from being on the inside that a co-operative ethos could, and even tended, to include both harmony and disharmony, conflict and togetherness, and that neither extreme was the norm. Coupled with this insight, I had been informed that the balance of these dimensions varied over time. In other words, what I had learned was that at some moments in the life of a worker-managed organization, harmony might be dominant while at other moments discord was the lived reality, and that in both situations, co-operation could occur. I began to wonder what the underlying assumptions and values were that could sustain these organizational qualities. A co-operative ethos, it seemed, might never be fully realized, even in an organization that was committed to it. Within the same workgroup, I concluded, a co-operative ethos was capable of shifting, changing and possibly cycling over time in response to conditions and circumstances I wanted to more fully understand. I started to ask myself: what are the dominant values and assumptions when participants report (either in the past or present) a balance in favour of co-operative experiences. And conversely: what are the underlying qualities when participants report less than co-operative

experiences? I started wanting to understand more completely how co-operation was characterized by people in the field, and what their world was like at those moments it seemed to them most in evidence.

Concurrent with the dilemmas, insights and perceptual shifts that I was experiencing in the field, I continued to be influenced by my reading. I started to appreciate that many writers were using models similar to the ones I had recently rejected, some of them assuming (explicitly or otherwise) that there was some correct way to organize a worker co-operative. With preconceived models firmly rooted in their minds, the majority of case-study analysts left little space in their research design for listening to the experience of the organizations they were visiting. Many of their published conclusions, therefore, focused on the failure or success of these organizations, but according to preconceived models of how things should be done.

As a result, the literature began to seem even more incongruous with the insights I was obtaining in my study. As a body of knowledge, it seemed to make very little room for the uniqueness of each situation and tended to make sweeping generalizations about all organizations of this type. I was particularly struck with the failure of other researchers to take into account the idea that worker-managed organizations might change and evolve over time. New co-ops and older co-ops, big and small, all seemed to be lumped together as being the same thing, having the same problems and needing the same prescriptive advice. My criticism of the literature specific to worker co-operatives, however, lead me into other more general organizational theory writing and it was here that I began to find more support for

what I was observing and experiencing in the field. In particular, I located a group of scholars concerned with change and development as a meta tool in understanding organizations and these writers began to greatly influence my thinking.

As both a rejection of the main thrust in the literature to do with worker co-operatives, and as a way of conceptualizing the experience of the groups in my study, I was beginning to think that information about the historical development of the organization might prove to be critically important data. I continued to be impressed each time I reviewed my data and talk to workers, by the degree to which organizational change was cited as a point of reference for explaining many dimensions of the organizational ethos. As a way of explaining their basis for actions and attitudes, organizational participants very often referred to their shared history. Over and over, workers seemed to use events from the past as a way of explaining and rationalizing their behaviour. Embedded in these events and stories, I thought, must surely be clues to the assumptions and values that underpin a co-operative or non-co-operative mentality.

I became more and more intrigued with the notion that change was a pervasive theme and with the sorts of things that precipitated and demarcated organizational change. I began to view change as linked to the evolving attitudes and needs of individual workers, the influence of new workers on staff, market growth or decline, and re-thinking about how to do the work either for reasons of efficiency or worker satisfaction. In other words, I began to see the organizational culture as fluid and dynamic, rather than static or stationary. My visits with

the three Toronto groups, and with QD, coincided with points at which change was the predominate feature of conversation. As a result, I was on site at a time when the organizational cultures were clearly in a state of transition and demonstrating their ability to be re-negotiated and even transformed.

To recap, the second learning cycle in my inquiry shifted my entire approach to understanding co-operative working. The intensity and depth of my research methods helped me to engage fully with the groups I visited in Toronto, which eventually led to a confrontation between the 'reality' I had brought into the research and the reality in use by organizational participants. My inappropriate first model of co-operatives as utopian communities was soon replaced with an equally misconceived model - the snake pit. Both models were inaccurate representations of the organizations I was visiting and failed to capture the lived experience. Developing a dialogue with organizational participants, friends and supervisors exposed my faulty presuppositions and began to redirect my inquiry in ways that produced more grounded understandings and insights.

This kind of research experience would appear to be fairly typical of naturalistic inquiry. Rowan (1981), for example, has noted a tendency in early research cycles to uncover presuppositions, which allows for tremendous learning and helps the researcher to locate questions that more fully reckon with the realities and meaning patterns that are being experienced. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:23) make this point in even stronger language, arguing that the value of ethnography is:

> its capacity to depict the activities and perspectives of actors in ways that challenge the dangerously misleading preconceptions that social scientists often bring to research.... It is difficult to maintain such preconceptions in the face of extended first-hand contact. Futhermore, while the initial response to such contact may be their replacement by other misconceptions, over time the ethnographer has the opportunity to check out his or her understanding of the phenomena.

At the end of the second cycle I was informed by a view of the organizational culture of worker-managed enterprises as having elements of both harmony and disharmony, co-operation and competition, conflict and peace, and that the balance of these opposites could shift over time in either direction. I suspected that any such shift was related to and possibly dependent upon a somewhat unique set of internal and external factors. As a result, I began to believe that an informed understanding and interpretation had to reckon with the notion of developmental stages or phases in the culture of self-managed workgroups.

7.4 Cycle Three

I began a third learning cycle full of new ideas about co-operative working. I suspected that some of my thinking was rudimentary and a bit fuzzy, needing to be refined and written-up, but I felt that I was on the right track. My understanding and knowing felt linked to 'real' organizational experiences. My large question remained very much the same as at the beginning: I was still curious to know about worker-managed organizations in both a specific and a general way. My Toronto experiences, however, had given shape to several more precise questions and puzzles and made me particularly sensitive and alert to the idea of organizational change.

I believed that at least one further intensive field experience would round out my inquiry and greatly enhance my pool of data. At the same time, though, I was drawn to the idea of a protracted period of reflection, reading and writing. Serendipity tipped the scales: Newham CDA, in London, became available for study, presenting the interesting and somewhat irresistible opportunity for me to function as both an employee and observer. I wondered what it would be like to actually work in such an organization, and believed that this could only serve to enrich my study, even though I suspected that it would tax my note-taking and observational abilities to the maximum. Would I 'go native' straight away? Would going native be wrong? Would the experience of being socialized as an employee be a rich and revealing source of data?

Despite feeling much more open and attuned to the presuppositions I might be harbouring, not long into my field visit I found myself re-living some of my earlier disappointment and dissatisfaction with co-operative managements. Although my previous exposure to conflict and discontent in worker-managed organizations might have served as a buffer, it had not fully prepared me for the troubled environment I encountered at NCDA.

My arrival at NCDA coincided with enormous organizational disruption. As I recounted in the case-study, several workers had recently resigned, one ex-worker was challenging her 'wrongful dismissal' through an industrial tribunal, four new people had been hired, the offices had just been relocated, and some clients were complaining about the poor and low level of service provided.

At the beginning of this cycle I often found myself conceptually retreating to the relative safety and security of the utopia/snake pit models I thought I had rejected. But this time, I was better able to cope with and understand these feelings. The perspective I had acquired from my exposure to the Toronto groups proved, with some modification in light of the actual experience at NCDA, to be a sound one.

Again the route to a more grounded understanding was assisted through dialogue. Although workers unanimously agreed with me that the environment was tense and conflictual, they were (like their counterparts in Toronto) reluctant to view this as tantamount to failure, or indeed as unalterable. In these conversations, Anne and Bob referred to moments in the organization's history when the climate had been more co-operative and friendly. Some of their optimism was invariably linked to recollections of other times when the climate had deteriorated but then recovered. The picture these workers painted was one in which NCDA had a long history of ups and downs, good times, bad times, happy days and unhappy days - dominated, nonetheless, by memories that were predominately negative.

One of the stories told by Anne was a striking illustration of how she observed and constructed her world as one in which workers would put their own needs first. In this story, you may recall, one worker had become so disenfranchised and alienated that she resolved not to speak to anyone else on staff. This resolve led to a silence that lasted and became normalized for a period of nearly three months. During this time, her main form of communication was through notes left discreetly on the desks of other workers.

The type of behaviour described in this story was completely outside of my work experience in universities and hospitals. Certainly, I had both experienced and observed difficult interpersonal moments in my worklife, but the thought of someone refusing to speak while at work for a period of three months - and getting away with it - was beyond my imagination! When I inquired how such behaviour could be tolerated, Anne talked in general terms about worker co-operatives drawing less rigid boundaries between work life and non-work life, between appropriate workplace and non-workplace behaviour. Co-operative workers were characterized, from this perspective, as having the freedom to be completely responsible and diligent workers, and at the same time, the freedom to 'misbehave' or 'act-out' in ways that might be highly censored or tightly supervised in more orthodox organizations.

Interestingly, it was a view of co-operative working that had a counterpart in the thinking of some of the people I talked to in Toronto. One worker at TBP, for example, argued that in co-operatives 'you have both no bosses and all bosses'. The expression 'no bosses' meant that the individual had great flexibility to do his or her own thing, be it self-centred or group-centred, productive or non-productive. 'All bosses' appeared to be code for the way in which individuals (or amalgams of individuals) could take on supervisory roles as they saw fit. In other words, representatives from both Toronto and London were telling me that bickering, yelling, and being emotionally-demonstrative, working hard, not working hard, being on time, not being on time, supervising and not supervising each other, co-operating and not co-operating - all had their place in worker-managed organizations.

It seemed that many things that I had observed at DEC and TBP had their counterparts at NCDA. Apparently, a variety of personalities and personal working styles could be accommodated at certain times and censored in other circumstances. The boundaries for individual behaviour, it seemed, could be loose at some times and rigid at others. Workers at NCDA were in agreement with a number of their Toronto counterparts that co-operation was something that came and went, ebbed and flowed, peaked and fell over time. As a result, a good deal of my time at Newham was spent re-addressing issues, themes and prejudices that had arisen in my earlier field work.

A good deal of my time at NCDA was also spent engaging with new ideas. In particular, I became curious and inquiring about something I termed 'the organizational voice'. While I was given reason to believe that the organizational culture could and might change, during my time at NCDA the prevailing characteristic of the workgroup was individualism. Workers always came together for a formal, weekly meeting, but the overwhelming pattern throughout the period was that of staff members doing their own thing independently of others. During my employment, all of us were more noticeable by what we did on our own - be it working or drinking tea - than what we did as a group. Besides the fact that I found this socially isolating, it seemed to symbolize something I experienced as a problem - the absence of a solidifying or integrating organizational voice. Just as several workers at DEC had wondered about their organization, I found myself as a worker at Newham asking the rhetorical question, what is NCDA? While I was almost always aware of the quite well-developed and articulate individual worker's

voice, I came to think of the organizational voice as less 'hearable' and less articulate. In my view, this was evidenced by the right hand often not knowing what the left hand was doing. The absence of some overall strategic goals for the organization, combined with the high amount of worker autonomy, meant that the organization sometimes felt like a group of six people going in six different directions with dissimilar goals and objectives.

I found myself dwelling on this absence of a group voice when reflecting on the organization, and near the conclusion of my employment I introduced it as a topic of conversation with workers. Workers agreed with my observation that it was difficult to identify the collective voice that was Newham.

During a long reflective period at the conclusion of my time at Newham, I was able to appreciate how my time with the architects and the Toronto groups had highlighted the significance of change in understanding the life of co-operative organizations. This seemed to be equally true at Newham. All five groups reinforced the idea that the culture of worker-managed organizations was far from static, and that any comment to do with culture had to be referenced to developmental phases or stages. An understanding of worker-managed organizations, therefore, appeared to require a reckoning with the various factors that both characterized and influenced these phases. My time at Newham reinforced my earlier observations that individual behaviours were inclined to be different at each of these phases. In addition, NCDA highlighted the importance of understanding these phases not only in terms of individuals, but also in terms of the group voice. To

understand the character and influences of a phase more fully, I concluded, one would also have to reckon with factors related to sustaining and supporting group integration - both structurally and socially. As I thought about all five of the groups I had visited, I could see that external factors had an important influence on developmental phases. Every group had illustrated the powerful influence that could be exerted by clients, customers, market conditions, and the presence or absence of a supportive community base.

Once I had finished what I thought was a long reflective period thinking about Newham CDA, I found I wanted to communicate my thinking and discoveries without delay. My first attempts, though, seemed confused and lacking in focus. For a while, there appeared to be an enormous gap between what I thought I knew and what I was able to express both verbally and in writing. I realized I needed to once again touch base with the experiences of all the groups.

Turning my attention away from Newham per se, I started to write about all the organizations and preparing the case-studies. The process of re-engaging with all of the groups proved to be an important part of my overall sense-making, since writing up each profile provided the stimulus for me to rethink and revisit the data. Once I had finished a descriptive picture of each group, I found that cross-themes and patterns began to surface that were faithful to the experience of organizational participants.

7.5 Further Cycles

In this chapter I have set out to describe and document the three

learning cycles that took place during my field work. I have drawn on the total experience, building on the idea that my learning had an action-reflection character, evocative of a schemata proposed by John Rowan (1981). My first cycle was characterized by realizing that I wanted to undertake research on co-operative organizations. My motivation to do research was influenced by forces in both my personal and professional life. My first encounter with an architectural practice in Bristol reinforced the optimism and idealism that brought me to the project in the first place.

My enthusiasm faded, however, when I began a second research cycle that had me deeply engaged with three groups in Toronto - two of which had long and often conflict-ridden biographies. Soon I was experiencing a confrontation between the workplace realities and my presuppositions. As I began to made sense of the experience, I realized that I had entered the research with an inarticulate model of worker-managed enterprises as totally harmonious, utopian communities. I then conceptualized a second model of co-operatives as completely conflictual and unharmonious, a model which was also misconceived and failed to honour actual organizational experiences and the meanings that participants placed on their social encounters. What emerged after consultation with organizational participants was a view of co-operatives that incorporated aspects of both models. A major insight for me was the discovery that the balance of the two extremes inherent in my models fluctuated over time, organizational participants reporting moments when the prevailing ethos was co-operative and other times when a co-operative culture seemed difficult to sustain. Arising out of

these insights and discoveries were new questions and puzzles. In particular, I started to wonder what sorts of values and assumptions were the underpinning of co-operative behaviour.

My third cycle began when I encountered Newham CDA. The experience of this group reinforced my interest in organizational change, and underlined the necessity of understanding and analysing change from the perspective of individual behaviour, group activities, group integrating mechanisms and forces in the external environment.

From that point, it came time to reckon more completely with the literature as yet another way of obtaining data, and in order to understand better how my own observations might build on the work of other scholars. In other words, a full accounting and appreciation of the relevant literature, and comparisons with the data I obtained from the field, came to be a fourth cycle in my learning. In the next chapter I set out to document in detail the insights I obtained during this fourth learning cycle.

CHAPTER 8

TRENDS AND THEMES IN THE LITERATURE

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I set out to review what I have learned from the literature. I will consider not only information that is specific to worker-managed enterprises, but also more general organization theory writing. Although I would characterize my inquiry as one in which I was weaving between the literature and the data I obtained from my field studies, and I have tried to illustrate and capture this process in Chapter 8, here I will be more directly focused on the literature. In undertaking this review, I have several goals in mind. First, to consider the scholarly writing on worker-managed organizations with a view to discovering its main trends and themes. Second, to use these discoveries as a way of comparing and further exploring the data I obtained from my field research. Third, in keeping with my observation that culture and change are important aspects in understanding co-operative workplaces, to consult some of the literature on organizational theory that touches on these ideas. This review aims neither to completely reject nor unquestionably embrace the literature, but to use elements of it to build insights, improve understandings and raise questions about the organizations presented in this study.

8.2 The Literature on Worker-managed Organizations

In the introductory section of my dissertation, I referred to

debates over the definition and categorization of worker-managed organizations and concluded that the groups I studied reflect only a few examples of a type of enterprise known as worker co-operatives. Most of the literature in this field, however, is more concerned with the organization and management of worker co-operatives, and is dominated by debate about the variables leading to success or failure. In this regard, one group of scholars seeks to explore worker self-management by reference to underlying supportive or dysfunctional structures; another group is less concerned with deterministic analysis and recommends analysis that is more individualized, with reference to cultural and social factors. Although my own findings and theoretical disposition more closely favours the orientation of the latter group of researchers, in this literature review I will consider information derived from both epistemological traditions.

The deterministic literature to do with the organization and management of co-operative workplaces has two trends. The first trend is discouragingly pessimistic and the second is suspiciously optimistic. According to the first tradition, the co-operative model of workplace management is too idealistic and fails to account for the realities of individual, social and political behaviour. Commentators from this school of thought suggest that this type of workplace either expires from its inability to compete with traditionally-managed businesses or is subject to social and economic forces that over time erode its democratic ethos, resulting in a predictable and inevitable degeneration toward oligarchy and bureaucracy. The second thematic tradition challenges this 'wisdom' and suggests that expiration or decline is

avoidable. The trend in this literature is to recommend a set of preconditions and facilitators for the maintenance and sustenance of co-operative management.

8.2.1 The degeneration thesis

There is a seductive line of reasoning in the historical and contemporary literature, as well as the popular parlance, arguing that co-operative and egalitarian workplaces are subject to 'poisoning' social and economic forces. According to this 'degeneration thesis', these forces will erode a democratic structure or ethos and replace it with traditional organization marked by legitimized inequality, powerful elite groups and hierarchical authority.

Arguments that endorse and support the quick-death or degenerative view of the co-operative workplace come from all parts of the ideological spectrum, rooted in conservative, liberal, socialist and Weberian analytical traditions, with additional support rallied from what can be described as an amalgam of 'common sense considerations'. As a way of bringing the disparate trends in this literature together, I have identified three lines of reasoning:

1) co-operative, democratic behaviour is contrary to inherent human nature;
2) co-operative work organization is incompatible with a competitive capitalist economy;
3) co-operative work organization is an inherently inefficient and frustrating way of organizing jobs and activities, and will thus give way or evolve toward the

technically superior bureaucratic form of organization.

The first line of reasoning can be based on either conservative or liberal views of human nature. The conservative view is born of a deeply pessimistic image of human nature, built on the notion that mankind is inadequate on many fronts, and requires authoritative government at all levels of society to keep the individual's most primitive and base instincts at bay. According to this view, there is an inherent order to nature, including the 'right' of some to rule and the obligation of others to follow (Nelson 1980; Nielsen 1981a; 1981b). To eschew this principle of hierarchy, in any setting, including the workplace, is to barter with the decline of civilization. Equalizing relationships at work, therefore, confronts the natural order, and is doomed to failure.

A much more pervasive and important line of reasoning is the popular liberal notion of humankind as not so much inherently bad as merely egoistic, competitive and individualistic. In this view, the human being is an egocentric, maximizing individual, essentially out for him or herself, always seeking to maximize individual power and control. Consequently, workers may co-operate and form partnerships, but only insofar as that advances their personal competitive advantage (see Turner 1986).

A variant of the liberal view of human nature underpins the hypothesis that co-operatively-managed workplaces will degenerate into oligarchies - a prediction first articulated by the German sociologist Robert Michels (1876-1936). Michels, a student of Max Weber, started out as a socialist with a keen interest in the organization of political

parties. Based on studies of the German Socialist Democratic Party, Michels posited that society in general and organizations in particular were subject to oligarchical domination. In his most famous book, Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy (1911; English edition 1949), he sums up his prediction with the line: 'Who says organization says oligarchy'. He concludes that 'the iron law of oligarchy' applies to even those organizations committed to democratic management. In Michels' view, organizational democracy schemes run against an important element of human nature - the quest for dominance.

In recent times, Michels' hypothesis has been subject to skeptical analysis. Many researchers disagree with the notion that any one person or group achieves overall domination, and argue for a pluralist view of power and control. Nonetheless, there is considerable support for the notion that organizations are subject to oligarchical tendencies which lead to the development of centralized power and control, or to the establishment of a number of power pockets, regardless of any formally-espoused egalitarianism or equal opportunity jargon. For example, the growing feminist-inspired literature about organizations uses power as its main reference in explaining inequality (see Wajcman 1985). Equally persuasive is the popular metaphor that pictures organizational life as a 'jungle' in which power-seeking and conflict are the characteristic features (see Morgan 1987; Mintzberg 1983b; Pfeffer 1982; Clegg and Dunkerly 1980).

A completely different line of reasoning suggests that co-operative workplaces are doomed to expire or degenerate because they are

incompatible with a competitive capitalist economy. This line of reasoning, embedded in socialist thought and typified by Marx, suggests that man is essentially co-operative and democratic, but is unable to act on this impulse because of the economic system and its political and ideological supports. According to this reasoning, the apparent egoism of individuals is influenced by the kind of economic and political system in which they find themselves. Consequently, any attempt to unleash the co-operative nature of man must first begin with radical and systemic change in the social-economic order. In this view, co-operative workplaces cannot effectively compete in a capitalist economy because competition in a free market economy requires organizations to maximize their efficiency and productivity, whatever the price in worker exploitation. According to this view, workplaces striving toward equality will always impair their competitive position and be forced to conform, or fail economically. Marx felt that the efforts to build and maintain worker co-operatives were wasted and misdirected:

> The co-operative system will never transform capitalist society. To convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and co-operative labour, general social changes are wanted, changes of the general conditions of society, never to be realized save by the transfer of the organized forces of society, viz., the state power, from capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves (Marx 1974:90).

For Marx: first the revolution, then the co-operatives.

The Fabian socialists Beatrice and Sydney Webb, were in agreement with Marx's degeneration hypothesis, and substantiated their position with extensive field work during the 1890's, in the north of England. In one paper they summarized their findings in the following terms:

> The most enthusiastic believer in this form of democracy would

> be hard put to find, in all the range of industry and commerce, a single lasting success. In the relatively few cases in which such enterprises have not eventually succumbed as business concerns they have ceased to be democracies of producers, managing their own work, and have become, in effect, associations of capitalists on a small scale. (Webb and Webb 1914:463)

To the Webbs, Marx was right, and they suggested that worker co-operatives were 'islands of socialism in a capitalist sea' and highly prone to the influences of the water all around them.

Contemporary Marxists, such as Mandel (1975), believe that it has become no less difficult for worker co-operatives to compete in a capitalist economy. Mandel's argument is that capitalists can produce without using time or energy on participatory decision-making and therefore can offer their product at a significantly lower price. In a free market system, he suggests, there are no returns and few rewards for producing things in a 'meaningful' way. Insofar as worker participation increases production, it is encouraged, but only to the degree that it affects positively a financial (as opposed to democratic) 'bottom line', and does not limit entrepreneurial prerogatives. Like Marx, Mandel is not opposed to worker co-operatives as such, but sees them as doomed to failure without an end to capitalism. Other writers argue that the impossibility of organizational democracy is rooted in causes other than the economic system. This line of reasoning, closely associated with the work of the German sociologist Max Weber, suggests that the bureaucratic form of organization is so inherently superior that any other type of organization will not survive or prosper.

Based on studies of the church, the army, and universities, Weber (1946; 1949) predicted, that because of the technical superiority and

efficiency of bureaucracy, it would come to dominate all of industrialized society, regardless of the economic system, both replacing and displacing any other form of organization.

Weber believed that the performance of complex tasks, and the equitable distribution of outcomes, requires clear rules, a division of labour and a highly structured hierarchy. Ironically, then, Weber argued that with the advent of large scale production, governed by liberal democratic norms, it was the very requirement for equitable treatment that led to the primacy of 'rational-legal' forms of organization. In other words, democracy requires bureaucracy. There is widespread agreement that Weber's prediction has stood the test of time. In capitalist, socialist and communist economies, bureaucracy has come to be the predominate form of organization. Although considerable effort may be taken to reduce and eliminate the problems of bureaucracy, as an organizational model it seems to be remarkably resilient and pervasive.

Contemporary Weberians argue that participatory democracy in organizational settings is just too big a bother - that it is time consuming, inefficient and frustrating. Holding meetings and assemblies in which everyone has a say takes time and energy that is not directly related to production or task achievement. There is considerable popular agreement that being part of a social group, work group or committee using this approach to decision-making can be frustrating, unwieldy and usually inefficient, although there is equally widespread dissatisfaction with bureaucratic forms of organization (see Held and Pollitt 1986).

Taking the pessimistic logic of the various degenerative theses a step further, a number of researchers have gone to considerable effort to outline the stages in the decline of co-operatively-inspired management systems. Cornforth (1986:4), cites Meister (1961), in suggesting four stages in the decline of a worker co-operative:

> When it is first established, there is a conflict between a direct and self-conscious democracy and a poorly established set of economic functions; the second stage is one of transition in which conventional principles of organization develop - if the co-operative survives - although conflicts continue between ideologists and practical managers; in the third stage, market values become fully accepted and a form of representative, rather that direct democracy is introduced, leading to a growing gap between managers and other members of the co-operative. In the fourth, and final stage, managers assume total control.

Equally discouraging findings suggesting the staged decline in worker co-operatives have also been reported from experience in North America:

> [In the beginning there is] great enthusiasm and hard work at the founding of a cooperative; incipient financial and personal problems; growing factionalism and disillusionment with the organization; the burning out and/or moving on of key members; and finally, organizational disintegration or continued existence in a non-co-operative form - in short, what men and women in the cooperatives call histories of noble failures. (Jackall and Crain (1984:102))

8.2.2 Challenging the degeneration thesis

The degeneration thesis discussed above would predict that few co-operative workplaces can survive, but this is not the case. Although there are problems with survey methods and in standardizing a definition of success, it is estimated that there are close to 1,500 such workplaces in Britain (Cornforth, et al 1986) and about 1,000 in the United States (Jackall and Crain 1984). In addition, Cornforth and his

team at the Open Universities Co-operatives Research Unit in England report that the survival rate for worker co-operatives in Britain is slightly above that of other forms of small business.

During the last three decades, responses to the degeneration thesis have taken several forms. One has been a reinterpretation of the classical writers such as the Webbs and Michels, along with a reconsideration of the early, formative research on worker co-operatives (Fairclough 1986; Jones 1975). Batstone (1983), re-examining the work of Meister, suggests that important evidence was overlooked which indicated that 'stages' of decline and degeneration could be slowed down and even prevented under particular conditions. Even the generally pessimistic Webbs and Max Weber have been recognized as allowing for co-operative success in particular circumstances.

A second, and for my purposes more exciting, response to the degeneration thesis rests with the findings of a group of researchers who have presented evidence suggesting that recent attempts at co-operative organization have been successful. These researchers optimistically assert that co-operative and democratic workplaces can succeed and prosper under the right conditions and circumstances.

The various conditions and circumstances that have been cited as facilitating worker self-management can be grouped into the following three interrelated and overlapping categories or levels of analysis:

1) the political, economic, social system - structural and ideological supports that can be put into place to promote and assist co-operative enterprises;
2) the individual - conditions that facilitate the

democratization of individuals, including those factors that sway individuals toward co-operative rather than competitive behaviour;

3) the group/organization - conditions that favour the democratization of groups, including those factors that help organizations to preserve and maintain co-operative and democratic working relationships.

Insight and evidence supporting these categories has come from theoretical literature, from case studies of both small and large worker co-operatives, and from social-psychology literature focusing on organizational process and co-operation.

8.2.3 Environmental factors conducive to co-operatives and co-operation

A number of researchers have concluded that it is possible for worker-managed enterprises to survive and prosper without major or systemic change in the political, economic or social system. Reference is often made to Israel, Italy and Spain, where a well developed co-operative infrastructure is already in place, and where both large and small co-operative enterprises appear to flourish along side their more traditionally-managed counter-parts. As a result, many North American and to a lesser extent British exponents of worker co-operatives recommend imitating the arrangements that seem to work effectively in parts of Europe and the Middle East.

These commentators suggest that, with the right structural and ideological supports, traditionally-organized and co-operative sectors can amicably and profitably co-exist. Recommendations are made for the

introduction of structural supports that would: 1) upgrade and revise the legal system such that it would recognize and legitimize co-operative business ownership; 2) increase the availability of start-up funds, loans, and grants; and 3) create co-operative advice and assistance agencies. Closely related are recommendations for more and improved ideological supports that would foster a positive climate of opinion through public education and promotional activities.

The concluding remarks made in Canada by a recent report of the National Task Force on Co-operative Development (1984:123) are typical of this literature, and recommend:

> much more government support of worker co-operatives in the form of grants, regional assistance agencies, revised taxation and labour laws that would be more responsive to the co-operative way of doing things, as well as public education to inform Canadians about co-operative working.

Similar appeals are evident from writers in the United States. In concluding their edited book, Worker Co-operatives in America, Jackall and Levin (1984:283) suggest that:

> Any strategy to fashion a firmer institutional base for the co-operative movement has to address at least the following areas:
> 1) the dissemination of information about co-operatives;
> 2) the creation of an appropriate legal system for the formation and continuance of co-operatives;
> 3) the education and training of co-operative workers;
> 4) the financing arrangement for co-operatives;
> 5) the development of technical assistance for co-operative groups.

Another American, Paul Bernstein (1982), suggests more government assistance to be given to co-operatives along with a 'public legitimization' of what he calls, 'non-ownership'. The noted Cornell economist, Vanek (1975), asserts that self-management is a fundamental (constitutional) right and he argues for more public education and more

national planning for a co-operative sector. On the same theme, Gunn (1984), a student of Vanek who undertook a study of large co-operatives on the Pacific west coast, came to the conclusion that there were three minimum requirements for a more supportive worker co-operative environment in the United States:

1) freeing material resources for development of self-managed production;
2) fostering human consciousness for its further development;
3) locating it in a viable and supportive macro economy.

In Britain, there is already a complex federation of agencies and institutions supporting worker co-operatives. The majority of British commentators, however, find this system under-financed, too small and lacking in focus. Because some support is in place, though, much of the debate at the political and economic level of analysis revolves around an assessment of the organizations and agencies that do exist. In the 1986 period alone, there were three major studies all asking the same question: is the system effective? As an example, the Open University's Co-operative Research Unit team of investigators studying this question (Macfarlane 1986), responded by saying that although the elaborate United Kingdom support infrastructure had been instrumental in the creation and start-up of new co-operative organizations it was of marginal impact on the longer-term survival of these enterprises. Macfarlane and his team concluded that progress would be limited unless more supports, in particular superior methods of financing, were developed to boost the new movement and help it secure a place as a

third sector in the economy.

In summary, we can see that there is a general consensus of opinion that social and political supports for co-operative organizations are desirable and necessary, although there is not always agreement about what this infrastructure should look like, what it should do, and whom it should serve.

In addition, there is a body of research concerned with factors conducive to co-operation and to the creation and maintenance of co-operative workplaces that takes a view quite different from analysis which recommends rejigging the political, economic system to make it more supportive. This literature, much of it social-psychological in origin, considers dissatisfaction with the 'system' as an important stimulus to co-operative behaviour and organization. This literature suggests that the system can foster co-operation not only in direct ways, through supporting mechanisms, but also indirectly, through the creation of oppositional opportunities.

Indeed, there do seem to be periods in history when individuals and groups appear to be more disposed to co-operative and collective behaviour, with little regard for personal gain: times of war, disasters and other threatening events are obvious examples. Although we experience this, or are familiar with examples when it has occurred, there is only a limited research base to help us understand the phenomenon. Much of what we do know comes from information obtained from the study of crowds and disasters and in this regard, Smelser's research in the late 1950's is still the central reference.

Smelser (1962) posits five conditions which favour the emergence

and development of collective behaviour:

1) general conditions at the political and economic level that favour grouping and solidarity, for example, war;
2) experience of deprivation, prejudice, discrimination, lack of freedom, or similar incongruity between expectations and experience;
3) availability of others with similar experiences, ideas, beliefs, values, and emotional symbols to do with co-operation;
4) a dramatic and often sudden precipitating event such as recession or political change;
5) the presence of leaders who provide the initiative or become the symbolic representation of the group.

A number of researchers have agreed with Smelser's proposal that there is a link between dissatisfaction, deprivation, precipitating events and co-operative behaviour. Under these conditions, group goals (for example, survival or social change) become more important than, or merge with, individual goals. Dissatisfaction with the system and a desire for change, it seems, can move individuals to organize for a common purpose, often with considerable personal sacrifice. One response may be a physical withdrawal from society such as communes and utopian communities (see Kumar 1987; Goodwin 1978; Goodwin and Taylor 1982), and another may be the establishment of organizations that maintain links with the wider society but define themselves as alternative and opposed to prevailing social structures (worker co-operatives being the example usually cited).

Kanter (1972) reached this conclusion on the basis of her research with communes. She found that collective behaviour emerges as a response to specific dissatisfactions with the wider society, and is accompanied by feelings of superiority, specialness and in many cases physical withdrawal. Similar conclusions have been reached by Case and Taylor (1979) and Rothschild and Whitt (1986). In their study of five worker co-operatives in the United States, Rothschild and Whitt (1979) report that all groups expressed an oppositional view of society and defined themselves as alternative and apart. Jackall and Crain (1984:95) agree, attaching special significance to the attraction which some women often feel for worker co-operatives as a way of circumventing the traditional workplace system:

> Collectives appeal to women because of both traditional female socialization and new feminist attitudes [that] place a premium on group co-operation and camaraderie among women, and on doing work with political implications; both of these experiences widely available in the co-operative movement.

As a result, we are left with the notion that being opposed to the system may have a relationship to co-operative motives. Worker self-management is reported to emerge because a group of people feel something is wrong with society, or because they feel ignored or devalued by it. This conclusion appears to contradict the argument that co-operative organizations are more likely to occur when society adopts supportive structural and ideological arrangements. In fact, both strands in the literature probably point to factors that may be conducive to co-operative organization. It is likely that there are a variety of motives underpinning co-operative working. For one group it may be a self-help motive; for another, state support systems may be the

driving force.

8.2.4 Individual factors conducive to co-operatives and co-operation

As I have already pointed out, there is a long tradition in political science and philosophy to muse about the inherent nature of humankind. Are humans capable of living and working co-operatively with each other, or is everyone always on the alert for ways to control and dominate? Are humans essentially individualistic and self-serving or collectivist and co-operative by nature? Some researchers (myself included), however, think that such deterministic questions are inappropriate. In this regard, we believe that a more instructive line of inquiry is to focus on those situational variables that might lead to co-operative or competitive behaviour. And, in fact, there is a literature using this focus and concerned with the factors that predispose individuals to co-operate in one situation, or at one time, and not in another. Unfortunately, the majority of this research has taken place in laboratory settings and can only hint at behaviour in natural settings.

Almost exclusively, laboratory research into co-operative behaviour has used a 'game' called 'The Prisoner's Dilemma'. This game forces subjects to choose between co-operative and competitive options under a variety of circumstances. Dawes (1980) and Turner (1987) provide convenient and up-to-date summaries of the findings that have resulted from experiments using The Prisoner's Dilemma (as well as other less popular but similar experimental games). Turner's review of the literature (1987:32 [paraphrased]) concludes that co-operative behaviour is more likely to occur when there are:

1) explicit instructions to adopt a co-operative rather than a competitive or individualist orientation (for example, instructions to act as partners and have regard for a common welfare as opposed to instructions to gain more than the other or as much for oneself as possible without regard to the other);
2) opportunities for communication, face-to-face contact and social interaction;
3) opportunities to establish social closeness (intimacy, friendship, etc.);
4) perceived similarity between individuals;
5) sharing a common fate or threat;
6) making choices in a shared public setting (a mutually shared psychological field as opposed to anonymously and in private);
7) mutual dependence (dependence on other people's willingness to co-operate);
8) conditions which facilitate and encourage mutual trust and empathy.

Dawes (1980) reached similar conclusions to Turner, but with the further observation about the importance of small group size.

Given the fact these findings come from the artificial setting of a laboratory, it is probably dangerous to transfer them to the much more complex setting of a worker co-operative. Nevertheless, they do make intuitive sense, and mirror some of the conclusions reached by commentators I have previously mentioned (Smelser 1962; Kanter 1972) who

have used natural settings for their research. Perhaps these lists are at their most useful when viewed as a source of ideas about the situational components to do with individual co-operation, whatever the location. From these experiments, for example, individuals seem more likely to co-operate when they feel a sense of trust, belonging and psychological congruence with others, experience solidarity through the presence of an external threat, and have opportunities to establish social closeness. What is particularly interesting to note from this research is the enormous degree to which social interaction is cited as influencing co-operative behaviour. Turner (1987:38) emphasizes this point at the end of his review:

> What seems to matter for co-operation, the decisive condition, is the intervention of social psychological variables that produce a mutually co-operative relationship. If one looks carefully at the relevant variables - shared self-definition as partners, being oriented to the common interest, shared goals and experiences, similarity, reduced social distance and increased social contact, empathy and trust, mutual attraction, the salience of shared norms and values, acting in public as opposed to an isolated private individual, etc. - there is a strong implication that the general process underlying mutually co-operative intentions and expectations is the extent to which players come to see themselves as a collective or joint unit, to feel a sense of 'we-ness', of being together in the same situation facing the same problems. In other words, it appears that the fundamental process is one of becoming a psychological group. Instead of social co-operation producing the group, it may well be that, psychologically, the group is the basis of co-operation.

This conclusion seems to be consistent with the beliefs and findings of most people that have studied co-operatives and co-operation - that it is the group experience that is the most important influence on when, why and how an individual chooses to co-operate and behave democratically.

8.2.5 Group and organizational factors conducive to co-operation and co-operatives

It is at the micro organizational or group level that the largest number and variety of conditions have been cited as necessary or conducive to co-operation and to the survival and maintenance of worker co-operatives. It is also at this level of analysis that there is considerable disagreement over conclusions. In my opinion, some of these debates over which factors facilitate worker co-operatives can be attributed to the way researchers have approached these workgroups. The typical research question is 'Are you doing what you are suppose to be doing?', and the particular way in which commentators frame that question ends up saying as much about how researchers think these organizations should behave as how they actually are behaving. What is evident in this literature, too, is that the philosophical and research orientations are not always made explicit. Another reason for confusion and debate stems from problems to do with definitions and with the specificity of the case being studied. Not all co-operative workplaces are alike or have the same goals, and yet there is a tendency to combine every organization of this general type into one category. When reading this literature one frequently finds a researcher comparing a small, radical and possibly ad hoc collective with a dual control co-operative that employs a hundred or more people. Keeping these problems in mind, let us look at some of what has been reported.

Joyce Rothschild-Whitt (1976; 1979a; 1979b; 1983), who also publishes with her husband as Rothschild and Whitt (1986), uses the experience of five small worker-managed organizations in the United States to recommend a set of six conditions that she claims can confront

tendencies toward organizational goal displacement, rigidification of rules, and oligarchization. Her 'therapeutic' conditions warrant first mention since they have become the standard by which most other researchers debate and compare their own findings. Her six conditions are:

1) Adoption of a provisional, temporary or transient orientation;
2) Establishment of outlets for mutual and self-criticism;
3) Maintaining a small size and limiting internal growth;
4) Ensuring homogeneity of membership;
5) Retaining a dependence on internal support (to reduce the possibility of being co-opted by external financiers);
6) Diffusing knowledge and technology (deprofessionalization and despecialization of roles and tasks).

Some researchers have criticized Rothschild-Whitt's conditions as too narrow, or not sufficient. Cornforth (1986), for example, using evidence and experience from the United Kingdom, argues that a transitory orientation is unrealistic, and that the ability to adapt to change is more critical to organizational viability. In addition, he cites homogeneity of workers as a recurring pattern of failure in British co-ops rather than a source of success, suggesting that expertise and special abilities should be recognized and encouraged. He

also disagrees with the notion that co-operative organizations need always be small, citing several examples in England where larger groups have been quite successful.

Gamson and Levin (1984), citing evidence from the United States, agree with Cornforth, asserting that deprofessionalization and despecialization ignore the need for expertise, and that homogeneous selection practices may be impoverishing to new ideas and skills. They caution that unless the work of the organization is extremely simple, particular skills and expertise will be needed. Emphasizing process factors much more than Rothschild-Whitt, Gamson and Levin (1984:222) provide an alternative set of 'foundations' for the effective functioning of democratically-managed workplaces, recommending:

1) development of a common culture or social contract in which there is a widely accepted set of values and processes that guide behaviour (that is, the creation of formal codes and social statutes with increased attention to recruitment, training and evaluation);
2) development of democratic norms for decision-making, specifically around the issues of authority, accountability, conflict and meeting productivity;
3) attention to an appropriate mixture of skills and expertise for the needs of the enterprise.

Without directly engaging in debate with Rothschild-Whitt, a group of British writers arrive at conclusions very different from hers. On the basis of observation of a number of what they call 'radical organizations' in London, Landry, et al (1985:13) suggest that loose structure, transience and lack of attention to organizational management are precisely where worker co-operatives have failed themselves and their supporters. They conclude:

> An understanding of organizational management is badly needed on the left. We should be defining management not as crude power or authority, but as the relative authority which is

needed if complex tasks are to be carried out effectively - a relative authority which can surely itself be managed so that it is accountable to the whole.

Jackall and Crain (1984) go even further than this, arguing in favour of job specialization and wage differentials, with more attention to creating opportunities for career mobility.

In a similar vein, the noted American researcher, Paul Bernstein (1982; 1983), after considering a number of American and European examples of larger dual control co-operatives, argues that power arrangements must be formalized. The following 'principles', he argues, will lead to the 'management' of power:

1) the formal sharing of management information;
2) statutes to guarantee individual rights;
3) provision for an independent judiciary;
4) creation of a participatory-democratic consciousness;
5) statutes to guarantee return from surplus;
6) formalized participation in decision-making.

The emphasis on formalized structures in Bernstein's analysis is at odds, though, with the conclusions of a number of other investigators, some of whom have also considered larger dual-control worker co-operatives, such as the Israeli kibbutz and the Mondragon co-operative system in Spain. For example, Rosner (1972:186), using the Israeli Kibbutz as his example, outlines six 'universal' principles applicable to all collectively-run organizations:

1) impermanence of any office;
2) privilege and duties not formally fixed;
3) equal value of all functions with resulting equality of wages;
4) valuing of personal qualities as highly as objective qualifications;
5) supervision as a function of public opinion;
6) absence of formal supervision and power hierarchy.

To take just one more example, Jo Freeman (1973), in her much

quoted article, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', concluded that the many women's collectives that emerged in the 1960's feminist movement placed too much emphasis on leaderless, structureless groups as a means of ensuring equality. She argues that if structure is not made explicit it will surface in the group dynamics - negatively and destructively. Freeman suggests that structure and democracy are not polarities and that a balance must be struck for success.

Striking the right structural balance, then, seems to be a concern regardless of the researcher consulted. Democratic organizations, most commentators agree, must have sufficient structure to make decisions and to get the work done efficiently and survive economically, while at the same time operating in an egalitarian manner, by all accounts not an easy thing to achieve. By way of summary, there are a number of group behaviours that have been cited as necessary to the survival and maintenance of co-operation and democracy in work settings. These conditions are best seen in terms of a series of debates:

1) more versus less formal structure;
2) deprofessionalization versus skill identification and specialization;
3) formal social codes (rules, guidelines and explicit norms for behaviour) versus informal and ad hoc procedures;
4) specific and differential incentives for the individual versus little or no differentiation in reward systems.

I will now consider these debates relative to the organizations I have

presented in this study.

8.3 Comparisons With the Field Reports, Part I

Much of the analysis contained in the literature I have so far presented is lodged within a deterministic paradigm and assumes that co-operation and co-operative management are static realities that either do or do not exist according to predetermined criteria. In many ways this was the sort of perspective that I originally brought to my research, although at the level of an inarticulate preconception. Fully engaging with the experience of the groups I visited, combined with my concerted effort to expose my preconceptions, however, helped me to work through my personal agenda and to observe with more acuity. Having gone through this exercise (which I recorded in Chapter 8), I find myself empathizing with some of the researchers I consulted, but at the same time I feel more able to challenge their methods and findings.

The deterministic perspective that is apparent in much of this literature contrasts with my view of the social world, which is more concerned with the variety of individual and organizational experience and with the range of ways that participants in a group or institution can experience and give meaning to organizational life. To me, humans and their organizations need to be approached more openly, and account needs to taken of the meanings and constructions that members use to make sense of their experience. In my view, the process of organizing is not static, but more a diverse and shifting reality in which concepts such as success or failure have minimal analytical currency. In conceptualizing worker co-operatives as existing within a predefined

framework of reality, I think that commentators have lost sight of the uniqueness and diversity of co-operative management. Rather than reject this literature on epistemological grounds, however, I think a more useful exercise is to ask if any of the themes and trends I have so far culled from the literature provide a helpful analytical lens for understanding the experience of the workgroups presented in this study. In other words, is there any congruence between these research findings and my observations?

During my research engagements, organizational participants never directly linked a particular set of behaviours to success or failure. When speaking of their own behaviour, the behaviour of others, and the behaviour of the organization, workers rationalized and explained what they felt and observed by referencing the uniqueness of their situation, work activities, problems and individual needs and talents. Behaviour was almost always seen to occur and change as a natural consequence of being together and attempting to find appropriate solutions to problems. When I would ask questions such as 'Do you think the way you do it is applicable to other co-operative organizations?', I would almost always be told that generalizations of that type were unwise and that every group would need to find its own best way.

Nonetheless, the preconditions and facilitators mentioned by other researchers do appear to have parallels with the groups in my study. At the macro level, we can see that many factors in the wider political, social and economic system have contributed to the start-up and ongoing sustenance of these organizations. In all of the groups I considered, however, opposition to the norms of the broader society appears to have

played a much greater role than anything the state might have been doing to support or encourage co-operative workplaces. The groups I visited all thought of themselves as different and separate from the prevailing ways of the state and of established social and economic institutions, and it is this quest to be different that appears to have given shape to the goals and management philosophy. One has only to think of the Body Politic Collective to appreciate the power that an oppositional tendency has to mobile people and promote co-operative alliances.

Some of the factors that have been cited at the levels of the individual and group also seem to have parallels insofar as these organizations are concerned. By returning to the work of Smelser (1962) and Kanter (1972), along with the findings of Turner (1987) for example, we can see that many of the factors they cite regarding the emergence and sustenance of co-operative behaviour are in evidence. In these groups, individual feelings of trust, belonging, mutual interdependence and sharing a common threat have all played a role in producing and maintaining co-operative relationships. Important to note, though, is the fact that not all of these qualities are relevant for every person or for every group. In addition, at the group and organization level, all of the enterprises that I considered experienced dilemmas to do with finding the most appropriate amount of formal structure, task specialization, division of labour, formal rules and level of growth. But to suggest, as others have done, that there might be one best way to solve these conundrums of co-operative organizational life, would deny the validity of the solutions that these groups have found. Rather than enter into arguments about which condition or precondition is more

important or critical, I think it is more appropriate to conclude that all of the factors cited by researchers have some degree of relevance, depending on the external forces and internal idiosyncracies of the workgroup in question.

The organizations I have considered in this study lead me to conclude that one must resist the temptation to over generalize, and that it is necessary to accommodate and appreciate the unique circumstances and purpose of each workgroup. In what appears to be a misdirected search for universal truths, the researchers I have cited have too quickly overlooked the possibility that what is helpful for one group may not be for another. And, just as importantly, what is appropriate for one group at one time may not be as helpful at a later stage in its development.

To my mind, there is another even more serious shortcoming to the deterministic debates: they downplay or ignore the holistic quality of organizational life. Although it is tempting to deal with only limited parts of an organization, such as its formal arrangements or reward structure, account must be taken of interrelationships and interdependencies if the various parts are to be fully understood. On a more positive note, and to be fair, some of the researchers I have cited do make passing reference to less deterministic ideas. It is to these comments, along with those made by researchers who are less preoccupied with explaining worker self-management by reference to underlying supportive or dysfunctional factors, that I will now turn.

8.4 Moving Beyond Degeneration and Determinism

There is a group of researchers who observe worker-managed organizations within a more holistic perspective by emphasizing cultural and integrating social factors. Robert Oakeshott (1978:214), for example, challenges his British colleagues studying worker co-operatives to consider the following:

> To what extent has it been structural and institutional arrangements and to what extent those other cultural and personal leadership factors which have been responsible for success?

Paton (1978:72), who has also considered the British worker co-operative movement in detail, is another early voice recognizing the narrowness of deterministic debate. He comments:

> Thinking in terms of fixed ideals usually leads to notions of proper structures for co-operative organization that ignore the [overall] processes that must take place if the co-operative is to develop as a co-operative.

And, to return to those researchers who are predominately lodged within deterministic debates, we can find the beginnings of the perceptual shifts advocated by Oakeshott and Paton. Paul Bernstein (1982; 1983), for example, includes the notion of a 'participatory/democratic consciousness' in his list of six conditions necessary for workplace democracy. Although he writes mostly about the importance of structural arrangements providing for individual rights, formal sharing of management information and formalized mechanisms for participation, he also argues that co-operative working requires a particular set of attitudes and values - what he calls a 'co-operative disposition'. This disposition, which he terms a participatory/democratic consciousness when fully formed, is 'complex' and 'shifting'. In his view, it is related to individual rather than group traits, and he arrives at a

number of individual characteristics that he believes are required to create and maintain such a consciousness in an organization. In his analysis, he requires such individual traits as found in Maslow's (1964) 'self-actualizing persons', with their propensity for sharpened perception and high self-esteem, as well as Freire's (1974) concept of 'critical consciousness', in which individuals, once liberated through social education, acquire flexible, co-operative and activist mentalities. Bernstein (1983:93) concludes:

> For self-management a person must lean generally in the direction of self-reliance, flexibility, and activism. He or she needs to be able to admit his or her own mistakes, be receptive to new and unfamiliar experiences, and be able to fashion compromises with others.

Although this aspect of Bernstein's analysis is particularly concerned with individual factors and borders on the deterministic, and one wonders if such perfectly formed individuals exist, I mention it here because it does illustrate his provision for more complex and holistic variables.

Cornforth (1986), who is also mainly lodged within the deterministic debate, agrees with Bernstein that something like a 'democratic consciousness' may in fact be very critical in the development of democracy at work, and calls for more research on the subject. In a similar vein, two researchers I have mentioned previously (Gamson and Levin [1984:219]), assert the necessity of what they call a 'common culture' or 'social contract' in which 'there is a widely accepted set of values and processes that guide behaviour'.

As a group, Bernstein, Cornforth, Gamson and Levin are instructive because they signal the idea that co-operative management and co-

operative behaviour may be something that social actors feel and experience. Co-operative working, in other words, may be socially constructed, and not merely a product of particular organizational arrangements or individual qualities.

Another researcher that has looked beyond the deterministic paradigm is Neil Carter (1987). Echoing Bernstein, Cornforth, Gamson and Levin, Carter concluded after his study of two British worker co-operatives that the ultimate manifestation of co-operative management is 'a co-operative consciousness'. Carter suggests that this kind of consciousness occurs when workers have full ownership and control of the business, with autonomy from external stakeholders. Carter argues, in other words, that only when workers completely own their business, have complete control of the labour process and work routines (circa Braverman 1974), and are not dependent on a limited market or specific buyer, can they acquire a co-operative identity and exercise control over the construction of meanings. While some of his conclusions may well reflect the particular type of worker co-operative that he studied, his characterization of the co-operative management process as 'the freedom to create meanings' is highly instructive. His is one of first indications in the literature that co-operative management has to do with how people think and feel, and that it is fostered by a learning process.

Helping to shape his conclusions, Carter calls on the work of Carole Pateman. Pateman (1970) has convincingly argued that co-operative and democratic processes in the workplace must be learned, especially because they are so distant from the prevailing notions of

workplace activity. Her argument is that participation breeds democratic feelings and actions - that the actual experience of workplace democracy is a necessary educative device for working democratically. For Pateman, as well as Carter, a co-operative identity is learned and created through social interaction.

A group of Italian researchers, Gharardi and Masiero (1987) and Carbogini and Masiero (1985), advance these ideas even further, turning whole-heartily to a learning and cultural perspective as a way of broadening understandings of worker co-operatives. Reporting on a study of nine worker co-operatives in Italy, they begin by asserting:

> Co-operation is not only one of the forms of enterprise ownership; it is also a cultural factor which exerts a direct influence over the organization. (Gherardi and Masiero (1987:323).

As with the other researchers I have been chronicling, they describe the essence of this cultural factor as 'the co-op idea'. They suggest that the meaning of the co-op idea varies from one organization to another, and recommend that researchers should not set about searching for a universal conception of co-operativism. They conclude from their research that each enterprise constructs a unique meaning system around the idea of co-operative working - a meaning system that is culture-bound and becomes the social glue holding the company together. And further, they report that the social glue (what they call the 'social pact') is 'shaped, enriched and constantly reinterpreted in the life of the organization'. At the conclusion of their report, they assert:

> The corporate culture of an organization, especially those elements that constitute the social pact, has a direct bearing on the shape of the co-operative itself. These are the elements used by actors to make sense of their lived experience, to guide their preferences in decision-making, to

> establish the uniqueness of their organization. Thus, current typologies of co-ops based on structural aspects can be misleading. It is necessary therefore to develop a global typology comprising cultural aspects as well. (Gherardi and Masiero (1987:343).

8.5 Comparisons with the Field Reports, Part II

What emerges from this second consideration of the literature is a view of co-operative management that both incorporates and challenges the deterministic debates. Reports from the researchers I have just chronicled ask us to consider both the objective and subjective dimensions; to embrace, but at the same time look beyond factors such as government support, ownership, organizational size and membership criteria. This group of investigators require us to pay attention to, and create space for, the meanings that workers themselves attach to working co-operatively.

This literature provides more than an additional list of conditions that might make co-operatives successful and gives us an alternative perspective for understanding these enterprises. It begins to create a different and refreshing analytical framework in which to consider the experience of worker self-management. Indeed, many of the theoretical implications contained in these research reports resonate strongly with the ideas emerging from, and grounded in, my own field-site observations.

As I reported in Chapter 8, one of the most profound insights of my research encounters was learning to be truly open to each workgroup's report of what the social experience meant to them. I came to realize that I had to both expose and let go of the preconceptions that I had

brought to the research. Once I became more aware of their values and beliefs, I was able to acknowledge and appreciate the diversity of meanings that organizational participants imputed to their working experience. In addition, I discovered that not only did the pattern of meanings given to co-operative working vary from one group to another, but that it changed and evolved within the same group over time.

When considered as a body of knowledge, the literature I have just considered recommends a helpful analytical framework in which to understand the organizations in my study. By recognizing that the conclusions arrived at within the deterministic debates must be seen as circumstantial and contingent upon situational factors relative to each workgroup, and by incorporating the ideas from researchers who reference social and cultural factors, a potent analytical framework begins to emerge.

Although the literature I have so far recounted contributes to understanding the groups in this study, it still fails to highlight one of my key observations. I concluded my field work with an impression that an informed understanding of worker-managed organizations had to reckon with the inevitability of organizational change and development. There is, however, a general organizational theory literature that focuses on change as its principle analytical tool, and it is to this information that I will now turn my attention.

8.6 Organizational Change and Development

In the last couple of decades the notion of change has emerged as an important underpinning to organizational theory. Nearly every

theoretical approach to organizations now includes attention to the idea that change is both inevitable and desirable. In general, organizations are seen to change in response to altering internal and external pressures. Internal triggers to change may arise from shifts in group or individual attitudes, motives, behaviour, knowledge, skills, or from change in interpersonal relationships. External triggers may arise from improved technology, new knowledge, changed customer demands, competitor activities, legislation, altered economic climate or a change in the wider social and cultural values. Over time, as a result, there may be change in the organization's mission or goals, its work routines or its social and communication patterns. (For a detailed discussion of these points see Buchanan and Andrzej 1986.)

Many organizations attempt to predict and manage the triggers to change, especially those that are external. Indeed, for many business theorists, the accurate prediction and management of change has become the hallmark of an effective and excellent organization (Plant 1987; Bennis 1969; Peters and Waterman 1982). My interest, however, is more focused on change as a naturally-occurring phenomenon in organizational life, rather than as a managed process. In this regard, I join with theorists who are of the view that change is an inevitable, developmental process - the outcome of adaptation to changing internal and external forces.

In the literature on organizational processes, and in particular on organizational change processes, there is increasing use of cultural analysis (Bolman and Deal 1984; Dyer 1985; Schein 1985; Ott 1989). Change is more and more understood as entailing a shift in the shared

values, beliefs and assumptions of organizational participants, which are then manifest in new structural arrangements, new stories and symbols, and new patterns of social maintenance.

A popular way of capturing this developmental change process is the life-cycle metaphor. Robbins (1987:18), for example, instructs as follows:

> Viewing organizations in a life-cycle perspective offsets the tendency to look at organizations as static entities. Organizations are not snapshots; they are motion pictures. They evolve and change. Using the life-cycle perspective makes us aware when we assess or describe an organization that it hasn't always been the way it is nor will it always be the same in the future.

The life-cycle metaphor conceptualizes organizations as having developmental stages or phases, each of which have unique defining characteristics. Kimberly and Miles (1980) write of the stages of creation, transformation and decline; Lessem (1985) sees organizations passing through phases of pioneering, managing and developing; and Lievegoed (1973) uses the terms pioneering, differentiation and integration. Greiner, in a much quoted article that appeared in The Harvard Business Review in 1972, presented his observation that organizations have five evolutionary stages, which he characterized as the phases of creativity, direction, delegation, co-ordination and collaboration. Greiner argued that each phases was concluded and the next one introduced by a tumultuous and revolutionary transition period, and most other commentators have agreed with this observation.

The recent work of the MIT scholar, Edgar Schein (1981; 1983; 1984; 1985), is particularly illuminating and worthy of some note. Schein characterizes organizations as passing through three stages: birth and

early growth; midlife; and maturity; with the further less universal stage of destruction. Schein (1985:270) suggests that the shift from one stage to another is highly contingent on particular circumstances:

> The kind of change that is possible depends not only on the developmental stage of the organization but on the degree to which the organization is unfrozen and ready to change, either because of an externally induced crisis or because of internal forces toward change. The forces that can unfreeze a given culture are also likely to be different at different stages of organizational development, and certain mechanisms of change will have particular relevance at certain stages of development.

Mintzberg (1979, 1983a, 1983b), the well known Montreal-based scholar, has also adopted a contingency and life-cycle perspective in understanding organizational change. As with Schein, he sees organizations as going through phases and evolutionary patterns, and suggests that the relationship between structural design, age, size and technology is not static, but dynamic.

A distinction must be made between those writers who endorse a rigid biological life-cycle model and those who see organizations as passing through stages, but not necessarily on a predetermined route to decline and death. Theoretically, I align myself with the latter group of thinkers for a couple of key reasons. Organizations have the ability to renew and regenerate; new and younger people can be added at any time. Organizations also appear to have a will to live, and they can be self-determining in a way that allows some measure of choice between life and death. I reject the strict life-cycle model that sees organizational life as a developmental process leading to unavoidable death.

In summary, the literature that characterizes organizations as

going through developmental stages has three analytical trends or assumptions. The first assumption is that change is inevitable, the result of adaptation to internal and external dynamics. Second, there is an assumption that because change is usually resisted, it comes about only in response to crises and threats to the previously established order. The third assumption is that each stage of development is characterized by different beliefs about what is important, about what is problematic, and about what is needed in order to accommodate changing internal and external demands. There is an overall consensus that the net result of developmental change is cultural transformation.

8.7 Comparisons with the Field Reports, Part III

Although the life-cycle metaphor is an increasingly popular and helpful way of understanding organizational change, there has been little attempt to apply this perspective to co-operative organizations. As I have already pointed out, the dominant voice in the literature on co-ops conceptualizes these organization as static entities. There is also a tendency in the literature to see any deviation from the 'ideal' type as deviant and failing. Challenging this deterministic perspective is an alternative voice in the literature which highlights the diversity of co-operative workplace experience, and references cultural and social factors. Important to note, however, is the fact that both of these analytical trends tend to downplay or ignore the idea that the co-operative workplace, just like any other workplace, evolves and changes. Consequently, there has been very little space created in the literature

for a developmental view of the worker-managed organization, a view that would recognize change as both inevitable and acceptable, a view that would take into account the different needs that emerge for a new as opposed to a mature group, a view that would create room for learning from mistakes and adaptation to changing internal and external forces;,and a view that would allow some groups to terminate or radically change their management style without being labeled a failure.

Clearly, the groups I considered can not be adequately or appropriately understood in isolation from their history and evolutionary patterns. In order to understand them as authentically as possible, I have had to reckon with the formative events that gave shape to their beginnings and the subsequent events that gave rise to their mature form. To emphasize this point, I will briefly return to the case studies. In the case of the architectural firm (QD), my arrival coincided with a moment when organizational change was imminent and the group was undertaking a reassessment of its operations. The organizational members talked of the impending change with both fear and expectation: they knew instinctively that change would create differences in how they organized their work and how they understood their workplace culture. Unlike the architects, the three Toronto groups each had long and complex histories to report - moments when external and internal factors had given direction to new ways of working and being. The same was true at Newham CDA. To understand what NCDA had become six years after its genesis, I had to appreciate where it had come from. Failure to reckon with the developmental patterns of all five of these groups would have missed the relevant events and struggles

that were to give them their unique organizational character.

8.8 Cycle Four

This review of the literature and subsequent comparison with my own field data has brought my study to the end of a fourth cycle of learning and has advanced my research in several key ways. By undertaking a thorough examination of the work of other scholars, I am able to appreciate better the contribution that my findings can make to the field. Before this in-depth assessment of the literature, I often found myself questioning and even rejecting the research of other investigators with what I now see as an inadequate understanding of what it had to offer. Now I am able to appreciate both the strengths and limitations of the work of others, and I am able to build on these insights. At the end of this cycle, I can appreciate the deterministic debates as another source of data, rather than as something without relevance. What I have learned by comparing this information with the data my field work generated, is the importance of reshaping these debates within a different perspective - a perspective that can best be described as situational or contingent. My improved understanding of these debates has enabled me to see my own case studies in a different light and with sharpened perception. In addition, by moving beyond these debates, rather than directly engaging with them, I have been able to isolate a superior analytical framework than I might otherwise have done. I now see how my studies can be located within the broader research community that is interested in worker-managed organizations, but at the same time is able to challenge that community to consider

alternative ways to approach and interpret co-operative working experiences.

What has emerged from this review of the literature and subsequent comparison with the experience of the five workgroups profiled in this inquiry is a recognition of the importance of analyzing and assessing worker-managed organizations within less restrictive definitional boundaries than has been the norm in the literature. The groups I studied demonstrate that there is a variety of forms and that there is no one best or perfect model of worker co-operative. Particularly important to note, both from my own research and from the reports of some other writers, is the idea that co-operative management can have different meanings for different workgroups, and for different individuals within them. These different meanings and understandings of co-operation and of co-operative management provide the foundation or architecture for the particular organizational forms and cultures that can be observed. Equally important, both the literature and the experience of the groups in this study suggest that these meanings change and evolve over time, and that a cogent analysis must reckon with these developmental processes.

A developmental and dynamic perspective, such as the one I have culled from the organization theory literature, provides a relevant and potent framework in which to further explore the experience of the workgroups presented in this study. A developmental model, by acknowledging the evolutionary phases or stages in organizational life, provides a dynamic analytical overlay with which to consider both common and unique structural and cultural factors. When combined with the

perspective that structural arrangements are situational and not universal, and that the whole is best understood through the lens of culture, I believe I have acquired a pertinent metaframework in which to reconsider experience.

Thus, my inquiry at this stage produces an image of worker-managed organizations as moving through developmental stages - stages that appear to have some common features and that can be recognized by shifts in structural arrangements, values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions. I agree with those scholars who use terms such as 'co-op idea', 'co-operative consciousness' and 'co-operative disposition' to describe and encapsulate the unique meaning system that groups construct to embody a co-operative ethos.

In the next section of my thesis, I begin yet another cycle of learning by using these analytical insights to reconsider the experience of the five groups in this study.

SECTION IV

CO-OPERATION AT WORK

So far, this inquiry into worker-managed organizations has documented the experience of workgroups and reviewed the relevant scholarly writing to do with worker co-operatives. In addition, a more general body of organizational theory literature (particularly the life-cycle metaphor) has been consulted. Along with this, I have outlined (in Chapter 1) the epistemological perspective that has given overall guidance to my inquiry. This section of the thesis, which represents another learning cycle, uses all of these sources as a way of further exploring and understanding co-operative working.

Throughout this section I will be using the term 'co-operative spirit' - a term that I believe incorporates, yet goes beyond, what most researchers have examined in attempting to understand worker-managed organizations. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, a number of commentators have used similar terms, such as 'co-op idea', 'participatory-democratic consciousness' and 'co-operative consciousness', by in a narrower way than is my intent. My studies suggest that the idea of a co-operative spirit encompasses something more than a factor or precondition, and that it represents the heart of the matter insofar as co-operative working is concerned.

I will be using the term co-operative spirit as a descriptive device which encapsulates a set of assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and values that can give rise to collaborative experiences in a workgroup.

In other words, a co-operative spirit is the foundation or bedrock; co-operative experiences the outcome.

The experience of the groups in this study suggest that a co-operative spirit materializes through a process of ongoing negotiation. Individuals arrive at the organization with their own set of assumptions regarding co-operative working which they take to meetings and informal encounters - settings which provide the forum for negotiating and renegotiating a common set of assumptions and expectations about how they will work together - co-operatively or otherwise. To understand a co-operative spirit, then, it is necessary to reckon with these negotiating processes in detail.

The key questions that have emerged from within my field work are: how is a co-operative spirit negotiated and enacted; what are the circumstances in which a co-operative spirit first takes shape; what sustains it; and why does it sometimes decline or recede?

As a way of exploring the answers to these questions, this section will build on the following observations and arguments:

1) to understand a co-operative spirit requires knowledge of the underlying assumptions and dominant value systems used by organizational participants;
2) a co-operative spirit is dynamic rather than static, and requires attention to the notion of change and thus to the existence of phases or stages in organizational life;
3) in order for an organization to sustain a co-operative spirit as the central element in its

ethos, it must adjust to change in a way that balances the needs of the individual with those of the group, while at the same time making appropriate responses to external forces.

This section of the thesis has three chapters and will discuss each of the above points in turn. Chapter 9 considers the change and development patterns of worker-managed organizations, detailing the qualities and meanings of a co-operative spirit at each of these stages. Chapter 10 is more directly concerned with variations in the character and extent of co-operation, even within particular phases of organizational development. It also explores the differences in the way that life within these organizations is experienced by its various members, and the different perspectives these people bring to co-operation itself. While Chapter 10 incorporates the change and development framework, it is concerned with how a co-operative spirit is negotiated by organizational members. Chapter 11 brings my study to a conclusion by summarizing and assessing what I have learned during the entire project, referencing both the process and outcome of my research.

CHAPTER 9

STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORKER-MANAGED ORGANIZATIONS

9.1 Introduction

In my view, the most authentic meta-interpretive tool for understanding the organizations in this study is within the life-cycle metaphor. As I pointed out in the literature chapter, the life-cycle perspective is an increasingly common way of understanding organizations in general, but has not generally been applied to worker co-operatives. Reading through the literature to do with worker co-operatives, I found this omission odd because the developmental model inherent in the life-cycle metaphor seemed to be so relevant and helpful in my own sense-making process. Such a model seemed to me to dove-tail with many of my own observations, and with the way organizational members made sense of their own experience. Their interpretation of experience on the inside seemed to have inherent within it a perception that change was a ongoing quality of organizational life. To me, the life-cycle metaphor seemed to offer a dynamic perspective in which the nature of co-operative working could be seen to differ between groups, and to evolve and change during the life of any one group - the very themes that seemed so evocative in the groups I visited.

In the discussion to follow, I will outline in general terms the way in which organizational theorists have characterized the development of workgroups within the life-cycle model. I will then illustrate how these general developmental stages appear to have their counterpart in

co-operative organizations, even though the specific culture qualities are unique. In my discussion, I will focus on the general way in which each stage operates and the ethos it tends to generate. I will then review and consider the specific cultural nuances of each stage for each group. As a result, I will be highlighting how co-operative workplaces do seem to have developmental patterns that are similar to each other, and with organizations more generally, but at the same time how they are separate cultures, individually constructed with their own unique and distinctive features.

In my analysis, I will use the following stages and phases to characterize the developmental and evolutionary patterns of the workgroups I considered:

1) Emergence and early development;

2) Building the organization;

3) Maintaining and sustaining the organization;

4) Maturity, reconstitution or conclusion.

Figure 9.1 provides an introductory summary of these stages with reference to general qualities that appear to have some common features. The figure also provides an overview of the sorts of meanings that can be attached to a co-operative spirit at each stage, and the organizational characteristics that it typically manifests.

Figure 9.1

The Developmental Stages of Worker-managed Organizations

Stage One: Emergence and Early Development

Co-operative spirit:
- intense social solidarity; oneness and togetherness; strong sense of family
- opposition to traditional forms of organization

Organizational Characteristics:
- non-hierarchical forms, few rules, little structure
- undifferentiated or variegated roles
- equality in remuneration
- homogeneity in staff background, outlook
- informal recruiting

Stage Two: Building the Organization

Co-operative spirit:
- co-operation can include conflict and individual differences - not everyone has to get along all the time, and not everyone has to have the same job
- concern with establishing identity and goals of group

Organizational Characteristics:
- development of structure and procedures
- specialization of roles and/or development of subunits
- inward focus on organization and its goals
- more heterogeneous backgrounds and outlook

Stage Three: Maintaining and Sustaining the Organization

Co-operative Spirit:
- co-operative working is a goal and it is not necessary to be perfect - it is something we are working toward
- some traditional organizational ideas are compatible with co-operative working and we can borrow selectively

Organizational Characteristics:
- entrenchment of structural norms
- reinforcement of division of labour and role specialization
- periods of apathy and of enthusiasm
- resistance to introspection
- further diversification in staff

Figure 9.1 (continued)

Stage Four: Maturity, Reconstitution or Conclusion

Co-operative Spirit:
- no single character; highly individualized with each group

Organizational Characteristics:
- maintenance of previous organizational form, possibly after a rethink or small-scale crisis

or

- movement towards more traditional forms of organization, sometimes as a facilitator rather than deterrent to co-operative working arrangements

or

- conclusion of organization

9.2 Stage One: Emergence and Early Development

In Chapter 1, I outlined the ontological, epistemological and human nature assumptions that I brought into the research endeavour. I indicated that I believed human organizations could be pictured as 'webs of significance' that they themselves have spun, drawing on metaphors proposed by scholars such as Mead (1934), Geertz (1975), Schutz (1967) and Pondy, et al (1983). I ended the chapter by indicating that my paradigm was to consider reality as subjective and changing, rather than external and tangible. In this section, as I set out to explore the cultural development of the workgroups I visited, I will seek guidance and direction from these ideas and beliefs.

Schein (1985:148), suggests that 'one of the most mysterious aspects of organizational culture is how it originates'. In his view,

> Culture is the outcome of group learning...the process involves a shared problem definition and a shared recognition that something invented actually works and continues to work (Schein 1985:183).

Other observers, including myself, also see culture as the result of human interaction around an issue, concern, problem or challenge they have in common. From these encounters, participants forge a system of shared meanings and understandings (Weick 1979) about the nature of the problem or challenge, and establish a shared perspective about how to address the issue(s) at hand. Berger and Luckman (1967) see the outcome of this dialectical, interactive process as the construction of a social reality, a process of externalization and objectification. In this view, thoughts, ideas, assumptions and values begin to have an existence outside the minds of individuals and become externalised to form an objective group entity. By interacting with others, the mixture of

ideas, thoughts and assumptions begins to shape a shared, external social reality about what the social unit will mean, and subsequently the form it will take.

Commenting on the process of birth and the formation of culture in workgroups generally, Schein (1985:273) indicates that it is usually an exciting period in which the 'main cultural thrust comes from the founders and their assumptions'. Schein adds that the emphasis

> will be on differentiating oneself from the environment and from other groups. The group will make its culture explicit, integrate it as much as possible, and teach it firmly to newcomers (or select them for initial compatibility).

In a similar vein, Kimberly (1980) notes that creation is a time when individual personalities may have an unusually strong influence on organizational behaviour because there is as yet no established way of working and being together. The birth phase, he argues, is a pioneering period - a time of experimentation, excitement, anticipation and imagination. Both writers suggest that the assumptions and values that founders bring to the genesis of the organization, become the basis for negotiating and constructing the culture of the group. Greiner (1972) suggests that these early negotiating processes are usually informal and frequent, drawing parallels to the early stages in personal and intimate friendships in which there may be intense concern with finding common ground on matters such as religion, sexual behaviour and political outlook. These general qualities of early organizational life and the development of culture do appear to have their counterpart in co-operatively-inspired workgroups.

Using the experience of the groups in this study we can see that understanding the emergence and early development of a co-operative

workplace requires knowledge not only of the moment of creation, but of the way in which the attitudes, values and beliefs of founders get communicated and negotiated toward a common set of understandings. Founding members come armed with assumptions about the sort of structural and social arrangements they hope to create (or equally importantly, that they hope not to create), and any differences in these 'mind sets' need to be settled and resolved before a common social reality can prevail. In some cases, these differences may be minor and fairly easy to resolve, as in the case of QD, SCM, DEC and NCDA; in other cases, the differences may be greater and more difficult to resolve, as in the case of TBP. In any event, there is usually much excitement, commitment and experimentation. These early interactions and negotiating processes are the ones that give the new and inchoate organization its early culture and establish the shared meaning of working co-operatively.

Quattro Design came into being when a group of four co-workers at a housing authority decided that they wanted to form a new architectural firm. Their status as co-workers and friends meant that they initiated discussions from the vantage position of being employed - no one needed to take any economic risks until agreements were forged. This group coalesced around the idea of forming an organization with a different approach to management: they did not so much want to change their work methods or their economic standing, but rather to create an alternative form of group management. On this they were in full agreement, and the transition was made even smoother by the fact that they shared a set of assumptions about the form such an organization would take. Reports

suggest that they assumed their new organization would be managed within an egalitarian framework in an environment of friendship and goodwill. Based on their previous experience together they had no reason to believe that these organizational and cultural qualities were outside of their power to enact. They held in common a desire to create a workplace that would be in opposition to the prevailing ways of organizing, rather than to the prevailing ways of designing buildings. Being in no immediate rush, they had the luxury of time to explore the market, find a suitable location for their office and talk through their hopes and aspirations. The transition to an egalitarian form gives every indication of having been smooth and satisfying, many clients and business associates following them to the new and cheerful offices.

The first two years at QD are remembered by the group as almost idyllic - they had a shared goal and a shared recognition of how to achieve their goal. Individual aspirations seemed well synchronized - there was sufficient work to pay everyone a good (and equal) wage; and members who wanted part-time employment were easily accommodated. As a result, at Quattro Design, a co-operative spirit came to mean friendly, family-like, egalitarian working relationships, and required little ongoing negotiation as everyone in the group seems to have entered into the organizational process from a similar starting point. Their internalized notions about management and work were transferred to an external social reality with almost clock-like precision.

SCM Bookroom and DEC also began as break-away groups. Founders in both groups had a desire to forge an organizational form and culture that would be quite different from the one they were leaving. At SCM,

the organization was conceived by a group of highly motivated workers who were disillusioned with the product orientation of their employer. They wanted to create a bookstore in which they could stock alternative literature, and by all accounts they shared assumptions about the sort of collection this implied. Separating the committed from the uncommitted was the fact that anyone who disagreed, or found the prospect of starting a new store too frightening, could withdraw from negotiations around the idea.

Initially, the founders of SCM did not pay much attention to how they would be managed, although reports suggest that members did have unspoken views about this aspect of the new business - views and ideas, it seems, that participants felt could be held in abeyance until the store actually existed. The initial interactions focused on the kind of books and periodicals that should be available in a specialized bookroom, rather than about how such a bookstore might be internally governed. The moment of their birth came when they chose not to follow the parent group when it moved a mile down the street to a new and glossier location. SCM merely stayed behind, and for a period of time carried on much as before.

The self-selecting way in which the group of friends chose to come together to form the organization probably accounts for some of the reasons that they initially gave little attention to how they would be self-managed. And, it probably accounts for a workplace ambience that did not require much negotiation - a co-operative ambience already existed. It appears that they were informally non-hierarchical in their social relationships, long before they went to any effort to change

their formal management structure. Bev recalls, 'we were all friends, you know - we all knew each other and liked each other - some of us socialized after work.' That there was a set of values about the nature of being together that had been previously negotiated is made evident by the many references to SCM having always been an extraordinarily friendly place.

During the first two years, the group continued to be formally hierarchical and maintained wage differentials. But below this traditional business veneer, members were beginning to negotiate a different set of norms about the nature of group management. It is not very difficult to imagine that a group such as SCM, who were so obviously committed to literature about equality, democracy and socialism, would begin to assume that these ideas and principles could be internalized to their own organization. It is also reasonable to assume that these were people who moved in circles where the idea of collective and co-operative organizational management was perceived and discussed in positive ways. These 'sources of meaning', combined with the cultural qualities they brought with them - friendly, sociable relationships - provided the underpinnings for the particular and co-operative spirit they enacted - a co-operative spirit underpinned by associations with equality and socialism, and reinforced by previously established friendships.

A formally egalitarian style of management was slow to develop. It is remembered as just happening, a process of evolution rather than design. By the time they 'officially' called themselves a co-operative, they were simply recognizing what was already taking place in practice,

the staff already working in a collective style in which there was equality in tasks, workload and remuneration. As with QD, a co-operative spirit at SCM came to mean friendly, warm and family-like working relationships, exemplified by harmony and goodwill. The organizational design they settled upon, with its emphasis on simple job rotation and sharing of tasks, embodied their underlying values and beliefs.

Apart from the similarity of breaking-away from a larger organization, DEC's birth moment was very much more dramatic than at QD or SCM. It took place at an Oxfam conference in Toronto in which several disillusioned participants decided they had had enough and loudly proclaimed their independence to the assembled audience. This was their first proclamation that they were a group - a group that would be different, radical and iconoclastic. The parent group was perceived to be providing the wrong product to the wrong people in the wrong way. Although these feelings had no doubt been fermenting for a while before this public declaration, the individuals who began to interact to form the social reality that was to become DEC clearly began with strong assumptions about the character their organization would take. In particular the group began its life with a strong set of assumptions about what it would <u>not</u> be.

Very much influencing negotiations to do with the organizational culture were two factors that characterized DEC in its early days. First, everyone lived together, and second, government grants were available to provide a fairly secure economic existence, along with the luxury of time for extended debate and conversation. Johnathan, one of

DEC's founders, recalls the early negotiating process as having the character of long, almost seamless, conversations spread over weeks, months and even years. So strong are these images of early group life that workers who were not part of these early formative conversations, but on staff during my inquiries, have acquired a common image of what they were like. These images, which have a quality of legend about them, were expressed through language that compared the early DEC to a commune, rather than a small business. And, as Johnathan recalls, the essence of debate in the early period did focus on just this area - was DEC a hippy commune, or was DEC a little business? Johnathan recalls that the dominant view which emerged out of these debates was that the two things did not need to be separated and that work, leisure and living could be integrated.

Johnathan's recollections seem to be accurate. Early negotiations did produce an organizational form that could marry these two dimensions - commune and business. If the government grants had figured less in providing economic security, perhaps the 'business' side of the debate would have been more prominent, but this was not the case. As a result, DEC, in its early incarnation, was an organization involved in producing, distributing and selling educational materials on the one hand, and with providing a vehicle for living an alternative lifestyle that included involvement in progressive causes in and around Toronto on the other.

Thus, the co-operative spirit at this juncture in the organization's biography seems to have been based very much on a mind set that rejected wider social values and organizational principles.

The group came together in rejecting the values of 'mainstream' society and its institutions. The manifestation of this co-operative spirit took the form of a communal approach to living and working in which there was no hierarchy or established rules. As a result of this egalitarian mentality, salaries were the same and all jobs were equal. Co-operation, at this stage, had to do with being together, not only to change the system, but 'to beat' the system as well.

The Body Politic collective, in contrast to the other groups, did not begin life as the rebellious child of a parent organization, but still shared some of the same general qualities characteristic of this early stage. It emerged as a self-help effort, in response to discrimination and pain - albeit with a sense of excitement and anticipation about confronting these problems. The beginnings of an organization that would produce not only a community newspaper, but also a headquarters for a diversified gay movement, emerged out of feelings of intense hostility toward an unjust society. And, as the masthead on the first issue of the magazine declared, the dominant assumption of the group was that social change and personal liberation could only be achieved from within: 'the liberation of homosexuals can only be the work of homosexuals themselves'. As their starting point, the founders of TBP were in agreement that there were enemies, and lots of them, but less clear about how to wage a war for equality. There were, however, a set of meanings about the nature of social change groups within the wider 'activist' community that appear to have provided a 'pool of knowledge' from which the founders took some of their inspiration.

As Gerald recalled, TBP began at a point in history when all kinds

of social change seemed possible. It also began at a point in history when groups and individuals at the forefront of social change seemed to favour an egalitarian approach to organizational management. (Remember Gerald's remark: 'everybody was a collective back then, weren't they?') Founders did not take long to espouse egalitarian values, and went so far as to document these values in the minutes of an early meeting. Specifically, they wrote that: there would be 'no sacred cows' insofar as the editorial policies were concerned, everyone involved would be equal, there would be no hierarchy, no limits to entry, and no division of labour or specialization of tasks.

Conflicting reports and documentation, however, suggest that other assumptions and beliefs were also brought into the organizing endeavour. Some founding members appear to have had strong views about the direction editorial policies should take, and were less drawn to the notion that roles and jobs would or could be equal. Even in the first year of operation, there was conflict over both the content of the paper and the way in which the work would be done.

A dominant view regarding these differences in perspective seems to have been negotiated primarily by a subgroup, which subsequently became know as the 'kitchen collective'. Gaining membership in this inner circle involved two kinds of behaviours. First, some people were prepared to make a stronger commitment than others (remember Rickie's comment that he ate, breathed and slept for TBP). Second, some people had, or quickly developed, a talent for argument. By all accounts, everyone could theoretically join in the debate, but the ability to articulate orally and in writing invariably brought individuals closer

to the nucleus of decision making.

The kitchen collective, by all accounts, was a lively place and the location of ongoing informal conversation and dialogue, supplemented by monthly formal collective meetings. The kitchen collective, with its conversations and encounters, as a result, became the forum in which the early culture was forged and solidified. The people who negotiated this early culture appear to have drawn a distinction between the ethos to do with editorial and political debate, and the ethos to do with actually getting the work done. The norm that developed around editorial policy was that it could never be fully resolved and that debate was half the fun anyway. The norm that developed around the work of getting the paper published, on the other hand, was that differences in philosophical orientation could be overlooked and set aside. Getting the work done was not about debate or difference, it was about hard work and collaboration, and even the outer circle was welcomed.

As a result, the co-operative spirit in the early TBP encompassed assumptions about how people would behave on two levels. On one level it was assumed that people would argue and disagree; at another level, it was assumed that everyone would get along and work together when it came time to actually get the newspaper published. The approach to work, as a result, reflected this duality. While job rotation and job equality were operative insofar as the organization of the work was concerned, not everyone was part of, or could take the heat of, the kitchen collective.

NCDA also had its roots in a sense of anger and outrage at the larger society - a society that founders believed to be dominated by

unequal opportunity. This view received daily confirmation by the obvious disparities and suffering in the London borough of Newham. Although motivated in large part by anger, the founding group seemed to have been up-beat, excited, imaginative and friendly. Perhaps the setting of early debate, in a pub, best captures the early spirit and ambience of the group. As Shaun recalled, the founders were 'a friendly little group who formed around an idea'.

Founders came to share a perspective that the organization should be 'non government' and 'non bureaucratic'. Contact with other co-operative support agencies solidified and confirmed the validity of these assumptions. Agreement was also reached that the values and organizational principles in use by the Clay's Lane Housing Co-operative were the appropriate ones for transfer to the new Agency. Their various shared assumptions came together in deciding that the organization would be 'community-based' and that it would 'empower people'.

Along with these assumptions, the co-operative spirit for the founding group at NCDA incorporated an understanding that the organization they were creating, along with the ones they would help to create, would not duplicate the injustices observed in the wider society. The negotiations that took place around these assumptions produced an organization that was clear about the way in which the community would be served, and equally clear about how the organization would be managed. Co-operative working, in this model, came to mean a rejection of bureaucracy with its rules and hierarchy, a community-based management structure and a workers' group that would operate as a collective.

The emergence and early development patterns of these groups can be observed to have similarity not only with each other, but with organizations more generally. All new organizations seem to have in common a need to establish an existence that can be 'objectified' as unique and special. Founders usually have some freedom to experiment, but generally they draw on knowledge they have acquired from experience and contact in other social settings, or from peers in the wider community. This may involve a rejection of what they have learned are the ways of other groups, or may involve a mirroring. All of the groups I visited had access to some of the meanings of co-operative working in use, or thought to be in use, by other organizations. The founders of Newham CDA, for example, carried into their organization meanings about co-operative working they believed to be operative at the Clay's Lane Housing Co-operative. By the same token, they took meanings from other co-op support agencies that influenced their belief that co-operative working required autonomy from government. This latter assumption provided direction not only for the organization they were enacting for themselves, but helped in the formation of a philosophy they would use in working with clients, as well as the sorts of work routines they would favour.

Similarly, DEC's construction of a co-operative identity included the rejection of principles and practices they believed to be in use by other organizations, particularly OXFAM. This process, more than at NCDA, included the deconstruction of other organizational forms. Combined with these negative references, founders at DEC also held positive assumptions about what a high quality of life might mean.

At TBP, the perception that it was necessary to operate as a self-help group in order to achieve the goal of liberation lent itself to the adoption of a democratic mentality. After all, homosexuals were in the struggle together, and in that regard everyone was equal through their oppression. Other assumptions that founders brought into TBP, though, made the enactment of a fully democratic structure less likely. Rightly, as it turned out, some influential founders assumed that commitment and talent would be unequal, given the volunteer nature of the organization. The formation of a social reality, for all the groups, can be seen as a dialectical process in which founders interact and exchange ideas, fears, and expectations. As common ground is found and consensus achieved, a shared set of assumptions emerge that provides the basis for form and action. While the specifics differ, these general qualities of cultural genesis appear to have some common denominators. Although worker-managed organizations tend to start-up for goals that are not primarily economic or profit-focused, and appeal primarily to younger, rebellious individuals, from other perspectives their early development would appear to be less distinct from 'mainstream' organizations.

In general, the choice of a co-operative style of management was for some of these groups substantially influenced by the environment in which they were born. By taking the five organizations as a group, we can see that the necessary ingredients for a co-operative spirit are probably in large supply at the early stage of development. In the beginning, the primary individual motives appear to be moral and political. The typical worker is young, idealistic, well educated,

often from a middle class background and often rebellious. In the groups I visited, the founders were self-selecting and chose the co-operative option, or at the very least rejected what they considered to be orthodox approaches to group government. For these people, co-operative working was seen, or came to be seen, as a desirable and superior alternative to traditional and hierarchical forms of management, and for some, as a way of achieving social and political goals. In addition, for some individuals, co-operation was linked to obtaining power and influence in the outside world, as a necessary antidote for dealing with a common threat or a generalized enemy (TBP being the most obvious). Particularly in the Toronto groups, we can see that choosing a co-operative and democratic approach to organizational life was perceived to be congruent to the social and political climate of the early 1970's. To these groups, being on the political left and at the forefront of social change also meant having no bosses and no hierarchy.

High commitment and moral involvement aside, these workgroups tended to start out without a clear sense of what a co-operative management system would actually look like. In some cases, a rejection of what is observed to be happening in orthodox organizations seems to have been the starting point, early days being routinely characterized with more clarity about what was being rejected than about what was being embraced. Referring back to the case studies, we can see that the early organizational designs were marked by a rejection of a strict division of labour and a concern for keeping the work loads and roles equal. Superimposed on this creative, experimental and rebellious

environment, and in some ways bred from it, there was usually a very strong sense of togetherness. In most cases, we can observe a sense of family and solidarity, particularly at places such as SCM where the organizational idea was little separated from close friendships. For others a special closeness emerged out of an increasing number of shared agreements about both the external and the internal world.

Not surprisingly, during the early period, there is a great deal of member homogeneity, or at the very least 'perceived' homogeneity. Even at NCDA, which came to have a quite different view later on, there was considerable solidarity and feelings of 'sameness' early on. This homogeneity can be seen to have reinforced and solidified a sense of family in each group, but it also helps predict the way the group tended to be organized. Early days were characterized by an absence of structure, and integration was typically achieved by shared moral or political outlook, social bonds arising out of previously established friendships, or by solidarity through the perception of being an oppressed group, such as at TBP.

As I mentioned in Chapter 8, some of the literature on worker co-operatives reports findings very similar to the ones I have made here, even though distinctions are not made regarding the developmental stage of the group. Aston (1980:21), for example, reporting on a survey of forty-seven 'alternativist' British worker co-operatives, found:

> [They are] distinctly middle class tending to be composed of people under the age of thirty-five who have consciously rejected more conventional employment and capitalism in favour of books, alternative literature, wholefoods and ecology.

Jackall and Crain (1984) arrived at similar conclusions based on a survey of twenty-two alternativist groups from the United States,

although in so-called 'rescue and take-over' co-operatives they suggest there is usually a much greater concern for economic survival. Carter (1987:325) also makes this point after his study of two rescue-type co-operatives. He concluded that 'the workers were not self-selecting and were motivated primarily by pragmatic considerations', influenced, he suggests, by the prospect of redundancy and the lack of other job prospects. But, in self-selecting co-ops like the ones I studied, the goals and aspirations are usually more political and idealistic.

As we shall soon see, the qualities that are so apparent in the creation and early development stage of organizations in general, and in these five workgroups specifically, can often become harder and harder to sustain as the organization grows up. After the culture is formed, there appears to be something akin to a 'reality shock' in which the group has to find ways of balancing a variety of changing internal and external demands. It is in this very important second developmental stage that the founding culture may be challenged and is subject to change.

9.3 Stage Two: Building the Organization

Many organizational observers find that the birth and early development stage does gives way to a more mature form, usually within a couple of years. Schein (1985) is typical in suggesting that the changes may be minor or significant, but that some sort of change is inevitable. The usual precursor to change, Schein argues, is one or more external or internal forces with the power to 'unfreeze' and open the culture for renegotiation.

As with organizations generally, the workgroups in this study can be seen to have evolved into a second stage of development. As I came to understand it, this second developmental stage is about 'reality shock', and involves a reflection on experience. It is initiated when the original consensus regarding the primary goals of the organization, and the original meaning attached to co-operative working, is measured against actual experience. Change, as a result, is linked to a revised perception about what is a practical approach to worklife, based on the experience of being together, and often made more complex by the introduction of new people.

I came to understand this second developmental stage as one characterized by building and solidifying a distinctive and 'realistic' organization form and structure. At this stage, the original meaning of a co-operative spirit may be either reaffirmed or challenged and changed. My field work suggested that the negotiations characteristic of this stage typically involve searching for shared answers to a number of questions, not always with success. These questions may at first be lodged only in the minds of individuals, but subsequently become lodged in the mind of the group as individuals start to voice, or possibly act out, their uncertainty. Typical questions that mark the beginning of this stage are: is this working; do I/we like this; is this the way I/we want things to be; what might be a better way; what do I/we really value and how can we sustain it; do we have a consensus; are there individuals who may never 'fit-in'; if so, what do we do with them? Similar questions may be posed in subsequent stages, but it is here that they first emerge.

QD is an interesting case because it provides an example of an organization on the threshold of this developmental stage. My visit coincided with a period when the group was for the first time confronting questions about growth, and their experience illustrates typical sources of conflict that a group must resolve at this juncture. Two years after an exciting start, QD was overcome with work opportunities - contracts that could not be turned down if the organization was to prosper and survive. During my visit to QD, Hugh told me:

> The issue for us to do with growth is deciding if we might hire someone to do the office work or hire someone like us to be an all purpose architect. If we hired someone to do the office work, that would ease our workload and we could manage without additional professional staff. But what would we do with the office worker? Are they equal? Do they get the same pay? None of us want to deal with those kinds of issues, so we aren't making a decision. If we had a friend out there looking for work and wanting to be part of our set-up that would simplify things a lot.

Another worker, Linda, added:

> We're using a compromise at the moment. We bring in a part-time secretary every so often. But nobody knows where she fits in - is she part of the group for decision making? Are we no longer a co-operative?

For most small businesses, too much business might have represented a moment for celebration, but for QD it evoked questions and puzzles to do with the meaning of their group. On the one hand, it represented continuing economic viability and welcome work opportunities, but on the other, it raised critical questions to do with the kind of culture they might be creating. At the time of my visit, the group was full of questions and confusion about whether or not to establish a more traditional division of labour. They were debating the impact on their co-operative spirit of hiring one person to do all the routine and

repetitive work, leaving the existing partners engaged with what they saw as the exciting work. For a traditional business, these dilemmas might simply be settled according to what would be most cost-effective, but for a co-operative group such as QD, there were important additional questions relating to the status of a clerical person relative to salary and decision making.

By the time I arrived at SCM, DEC, TBP and NCDA, there were memories and stories of a having made a transition from a formative stage in organizational development. At SCM, the transition is remembered as having been quite smooth. Demand for their product grew rapidly and workers found specialized niches in the bookstore's expanding and diversifying collections, although at the same time they chose to retain a simple rotation of all the routine tasks of running the business. In their reports to me, they indicated that the changes in work routines toward a degree of specialization were in concert with a reaffirmation of their key values: equality, togetherness and friendliness. It seems that their early experience together confirmed that these values could be maintained and sustained. Selection of new people emphasized these social factors more than job knowledge factors. Working at SCM continued to be understood as 'joining a family'; everything else could be learned on-the-job.

For SCM, a co-operative spirit continued to be linked to an egalitarian mentality. Experience confirmed the validity of their original assumptions and values, and there was no stimulus to substantially renegotiate their dominant ideology or their approach to co-operative working.

In contrast, at NCDA, some of the assumptions that founders brought into the organization did not match with experience. They began with assumptions about the desirability of being non government, non bureaucratic, community-based and egalitarian, which provided the foundation for a loose, friendly informal structure - somewhat like an extension of the pub environment where they had first found each other. What they experienced, however, was that these values and beliefs were difficult to operationalize as fully as they might have wished or imagined possible. For example, the structure that they adopted was based on their belief that the constituent community would voluntarily take an active role in running the Agency, but this assumption proved to be unrealistic in practice. The co-op forum, while a good idea on paper, did not receive the response they expected, most noticeable by the fact that people failed to show up for meetings.

The results of renegotiations from the period appear to have shifted the organizational culture in several key ways. First, the idea of an Agency run by its constituency community was more or less forgotten, and it is at this point that we see the emergence of the term 'clients'. The second shift that took place was with the founders themselves. Originally, they had assumed that leaders would emerge from the co-op forum - people who would be ready to take on the added commitment of being on the planning committee. The failure of the co-op forum, however, challenged this assumption as well. Even the founders (who at this stage <u>were</u> the planning committee) were not ready to make a life-long commitment, and with the dearth of new people coming along, the planning committee (and thus the founders) began to assume a much

lower profile. Planned or not, it is in this way that the workers came to be the main force in 'managing the meanings' of the organization. Within a year and a half of its birth, NCDA had come to be a quite different organization from what it had set out to be.

The fact that the workers came to have principal control of the organization had significant ramifications for the culture. The egalitarian philosophy of the founders continued to be the espoused philosophy, but even in the early period workers seemed to have difficulty in translating this mentality into practice, and possibly not the desire to. The experience was that workers did not necessarily arrive with the same values and beliefs as the founders, and even if they did, some of their early experiences together suggested that equality was a rather hard basis on which to enact a day-to-day pattern of working.

At DEC, the assumptions about an integrated life that founders brought into the organization proved less and less feasible with the passage of time, although the formative first stage in group development lasted for a relatively long time - well over three years. Growth and diversification, partly resulting from the success in getting government funding, created some of the impetus to change (just as it was about to at QD). New members, for example, did not become part of the communal house, even if they shared some its values.

Some commune-like qualities remained for a time. As Johnathan told us in the case study, DEC seemed to have a prolonged period in which it could offer these options to its membership: a fully alternative life, or an alternative workplace. New and old members, communers and non

communers, seemed to get along and find a certain common ground in their political outlook, integration being facilitated by frequent social events and selection of new personnel primarily through friendship networks.

Gradually, however, there came to be a separation between work, leisure and living for most members of the organization. Johnathan tells us that his experience of this change was the source of some disappointment for him personally (and probably for some others), but could not be dismissed when measured against what was actually taking place. This experience of change about what DEC had become provided the impetus for reflecting upon and rethinking the nature of the organization. Renegotiations began about what DEC actually meant, rather than what some people might have wanted DEC to mean.

Out of these discussions, there emerged a new version of DEC. The most tangible outcome of these negotiations was a decision to relocate into a church basement, where all the business activities would take place and be centralized. At this time, some values and beliefs appear to have been reaffirmed, some discarded, and some new ones added. Significantly, the overall egalitarian mentality was kept intact, and continued to be the underlying ideological force. In addition, individuals at DEC continued to define themselves as iconoclastic, alternativist and different. Changes in the location and organization of the work, however, suggests that there had been a shift in how people believed these values could be enacted. In this new model, life and work were conceived as more separated activities.

While it is reported as 'natural' that workers carved out roles

around particular interest areas, the change also signalled a new consensus about the meaning of the organization and the meaning of co-operative working. By this time, experience had taught that some people liked some activities and jobs better than others, and that some people had more talent in particular areas such as film making and writing. At DEC, a division of labour seemed to have been quite compatible with their notion of equality, once they had reached agreements that work would be a more separated activity. The shift in the organization of work at this developmental stage, however, laid the groundwork for some of the profound changes in the pattern of co-operation that became apparent later in its history.

TBP is a particularly illuminating illustration of this developmental stage. In the case study I recounted some of the stories that were symbolic of the transition from stage one to stage two - the story to do with the expulsion of Jearld, one of the founders, being the most dramatic. Although dramatic, this example was not exceptional. People who were part of the organization at this juncture recall experiences in which people left, new people joined and everything seemed unsettled. To the degree that TBP was, in the language of one writer, 'a happy little group of homos who weren't going to take any more shit', only the latter part of the characterization actually matched with experience. The legendary battles with the police and government provided rallying points, but these events did not have much to do with whether or not people actually liked each other, only that they would need to work together. Interactions and other experiences had established that the gay community represented a very diverse

community - perhaps more than the founders had assumed - and that solidarity would be very hard to achieve, both in the wider community and inside the organization. The common factor of being gay, and the shared perception of being oppressed, proved to be too weak an experience base to fully assimilate the wide range of people who found their way to the door of the organization.

Out of early experiences of conflict, confrontation and, let us not forget, co-operation, the TBP changed while it survived and grew. By the fifth year, there was still no full-fledged ideological consensus, and personalities continued to clash sharply, but it did not seem to matter anymore. By then, assumptions about the appropriate ambience of the organization, and the meaning of co-operation itself, had shifted in ways that were more congruent with experience. Gerald's comment, 'It's the way it is at TBP', is worth remembering and noting. Ideological splits and divisions were observed to be the way things were at TBP, and space had been created for a variety of personalities and political orientations. A co-operative spirit came to be about needing and liking each other in a political, rather than interpersonal, context.

What we can glean from the accounts of people arguing and disagreeing, yet staying together, is a picture of an organization that had stopped expecting or requiring uniformity and had learned to incorporate and accept diversity. Even people as diverse as Ken and Tim had found ways of working together and recognizing each other's contribution - even though they did not like each other. The group identity that emerged was one in which loud and conflicting individual voices became normal, and where arguments could erupt easily but without

catastrophic results. What held it together continued to be the external enemy - the homophobic society - and a sense of serving a vital need for gay men and lesbians. In order to influence the outside, people needed each other.

Some activities at TBP, though, did seem to withstand the test of experience and required minimal re-evaluation. Members found that their early decisions to specialize the work and to make each work area interdependent proved to be a good formula to deal with the realities they experienced. A fairly large measure of unity and solidarity seemed to have been experienced at this level and no attempts were made to renegotiate the specialized approach to getting the work done.

At SCM, a 'building-the-organization' stage seemed to have occurred naturally as an evolutionary rather revolutionary process. For other groups such as DEC, TBP and NCDA, however, this transition seems to have been more difficult. My investigations led me to conclude that finding a shared vision beyond the formative stage was not a particularly easy thing to do. Stage two seems to lack the excitement that characterized the first stage. More often than not, finding a distinctive and realistic group identity appears to have been accompanied by considerable turmoil, debate and turnover of personnel. The result for some groups seems to have been an agreement to disagree, rather than the successful formulation of a more elaborated consensus.

To the degree that there is a general quality to this stage, it seems to be that tacit agreements and shared assumptions are reached about what constitutes the most workable (rather than perfect) approach to co-operative working. At SCM, the founding ethos changed very little

because ideals seemed to mesh with the reality of experience. But in the other organizations, experience often contradicted the ideal, prompting a reassessment and rethink.

As we have seen, assumptions about the nature of organization, life and politics, along with the meaning founders attach to co-operative working, provides the basis for initial interactions and, subsequently, the construction of a shared reality. This philosophical bartering lays the foundation for negotiations about the form and structure the organization will assume. In all of the cases being considered here, an egalitarian mentality emerged as the dominant group ethos, producing an approach to co-operative working characterized by equality in jobs and roles, usually achieved in the early stages through job rotation. The information I have gathered suggests that a second developmental stage is often demarcated by a move away from job rotation and toward a division of labour, even though an egalitarian mentality is usually reaffirmed as the key espoused value. At DEC, TBP and NCDA, the shift to specialization signalled not only a response to increased workload and to individual needs and talents, but also a significant shift in how they believed they could operationalize their dominant ideology of egalitarianism.

Negotiations and interactions that take place at this stage, though, can also result in shifts in the pattern of influence. In the formulation of a dominant view of reality, there may not always have been full agreement. Those individuals who have had their views and ideas assume a dominant role may well have acquired more influence as part of the negotiation process. At DEC, for example, it is to this

developmental period that Johnathan refers when talking about shifts in leadership. Looking back, he wonders if there had been a consensus at all, and asks if what had 'really' happened was that stronger individuals began to assume 'control' of what DEC would mean. At TBP as well, we can see the emergence of voices and views that come to dominate over others, Ken being the most startling individual example, and the entrenchment of the kitchen collective being symbolic of the fact that an inner circle did and would continue to exist. In both cases, we witness the beginnings of a decision making process that is less clear cut and more complex than the espoused version which pictures the collective meeting as omnipotent. What seems to happen is that some individuals acquire very strong personal goals and visions, and want to shape the organization in ways that are in accord with their own ideas and values. At the same time, other individuals seem ready to defer, or become so preoccupied with their day-to-day work that they seem to lose interest or motivation to argue. Mangham and Overington (1983) use a dramaturgical metaphor to capture this process, liking the human interactions involved in cultural change to 'a struggle for the script'. Smircich and Morgan (1982) use a similar expression to picture this process: 'managing the meanings'.

In co-operatively-managed organizations, perhaps more than in other situations, this building stage has the potential to unleash conflict because there is no single owner or chief executive officer with legitimized power to shape the culture and hire others who will agree to subscribe to his or her vision. In democratic organizations there is much greater scope for individual voices to be heard and, for all its

advantages, the potential for open conflict and disagreement is inherently high. Paton (1978:51), for example, notes:

> It is clear that co-operatives must come to terms with the fact that conflict is likely to be endemic, and how it is handled may largely determine the social development of the enterprise. Unless the issue is confronted, the alternatives appear to be differences which fester below the surface, threatening always to erupt in wild politicization of the company; or continual destructive clashes for as long as the enterprise can endure them without fracturing.

Although the possibility for conflict is perhaps higher in co-operatives than in more hierarchical groups, the literature suggests that most organizations, even traditionally-managed ones, experience considerable conflict during this building stage. A considerable body of research tells us that building any small business organization that will survive is not easy, and the failure rate is particularly high during the first couple of years (Cornforth, et al 1988). Schein (1985:275) comments:

> During this phase conflicts [emerge] over what elements of the culture employees like or do not like. Battles thus develop between conservatives, who like the founding culture, and liberals or radicals who want to change the culture.

On the same theme, Kimberly and Miles (1980:16) observe that, in general,

> Efforts to grow too quickly; lack of formalized rules, policies and procedures from the outset; lack of qualified personnel; early overemphasis on efficiency; and financial dilemmas can all create conflict in the early development of workgroups.

In the groups presented here, the creation of a distinctive culture or a stabilized agreement to disagree demarcates the concluding feature of the second stage of development. In most cases, we have seen that at the end of this stage, a shared agreement has been found about the

meaning of a co-operative spirit - one that tends to incorporate and accommodate conflict and individual differences within the framework of egalitarianism. At TBP, Ken could have his little 'kerfufles'; Tim could aspire to 'balance and harmony' in group life without having to reach it; and Gerald could believe that it was 'best to not deal with some conflict and just accept it'. At DEC, Johnathan could co-exist with people who thought the values of communal living were impractical and anachronistic; Richard could work with people with whom he did not share 'cultural references'; and Margie and Todd, in book distribution, could accept and find ways to function within a group that, in their words, was 'not all that homogeneous anymore'. At NCDA, Bob and Anne found 'independent' work worlds to help them avoid and accommodate the conflict they believed was indigenous to their type of organization. In some ways, after its 'test' against experience, co-operation has come to be viewed as the goal, rather than the immediate reality.

At this stage, with work usually designed around individual needs and pressures, and the influential individual voices surfacing more routinely, problems in maintaining an 'organizational voice' sometimes take root. By the end of this stage, with all of its accommodations to 'reality' and 'realism', there can be a shadow-side germinating. This shadow-side, as I came to understand it, involves a breakdown or impoverishment of the overall 'voice' that speaks for everyone as a collective - the voice that creates a rallying point; the voice that co-ordinates activities and provides direction to the parts. As we will see in further stages of development, it is this shadow-side that may have become just as entrenched as its more positive counterpart.

9.4 Stage Three: Maintaining and Sustaining the Organization

My field work with SCM, DEC, TBP and NCDA occurred at a point when the organizational cultures had been more or less fixed for an extended period. As a result, much of the case-study material is concerned with providing a picture of the organizations in this mature form. Interestingly, though, my field work occurred at a time when considerable rethinking and renegotiation were taking place, suggesting that the mature form can and does change. I came to appreciate that the mature form represented a third stage in development, and that some of my observations had to do with the transition to a fourth phase.

The third developmental stage is entered when organizational members come to a shared understanding of the form their organization will take - an understanding that has been forged out of the experience-reflection praxis of stage two. In these groups, this stage is usually evident by the second or third year of operation. As I came to understand it, this stage is much more static than the previous ones, and minor adjustments can be accommodated without evoking a more systematic rethink. The stage is characterized by finding ways to maintain and sustain the beliefs and organizational form that have emerged out of stage two. It is a phase in which any proposal for major change in the dominant ideology or way of working is unwelcome and usually thwarted. The dominant preoccupation of this stage is maintenance and sustenance rather than reassessment.

Schein (1985) calls this period 'midlife', a phase in the organizational biography when there has been sufficient experimentation and experience to know

> [what] has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Similarly, Livegoed (1973), describes it as the phase of integration, a time to build on what has been established, rather than to renegotiate in any significant way. The question, 'Who are we?' is not heard so much by this stage; in its place is the more comforting thought 'This is who we are - for better or worse'. A culture has developed that incorporates cumulative taken-for-granted assumptions about the social environment and work routines, and there are reasons and explanations for pretty well every aspect of organizational life. By this point there are plenty of stories, legends and symbols to reinforce values and beliefs, and an architecture has been found that can embody and sustain this ethos. Minor change in environmental forces can be dealt with and minor change in routines can be accommodated, but major shifts in the underlying values and beliefs are unlikely in the absence of a major life threat or a large influx of new people.

Much of my case study material describes worker-managed organizations at this stage of development, and much of the information resonates with the observations of writers such as Schein who are concerned with workgroups more generally. In this stage, most of the negotiations that take place have to do with finding ways of maintaining and sustaining the culture that has emerged out of stage two. The culture is constructed as something 'received' and 'tested' from an earlier period, and it has become inappropriate to question the validity of these assumptions. It is also a stage in which both the positive and counterproductive features of the culture have become more and more

institutionalized. In all of these groups, the meaning of co-operative working has come to include a decentralized approach to the organization of work, an acceptance of some unequal influence, and a recognition that collective decision making is less than perfect.

In order to maintain and sustain the group culture, it was my observation that organizational participants perpetuated and transmitted their ethos in a number of ways. First, they used stories and legends to communicate messages about 'the way it is around here'. Using NCDA as an example, the stories I was told about the behaviour of workers in the past usually had two important, though somewhat contradictory, messages about the culture generally, and about what I should think and feel as an employee. Anne's story about a worker who was always late or absent, combined with her story about a worker who had refused to talk and would only communicate by hand-written notes, provided powerful messages about what the Agency was all about. On the one hand, it spoke to the enormous freedom that individuals could have in the organization - even to misbehave. On the other hand, the stories revealed the sort of attitudes one should have about co-workers, and how one should adapt to the reality. The stories suggested that people would abuse the system and that there was no clear way of dealing with this. To adapt, the stories suggested, one had to learn to ignore such behaviour - failure to do so could result in a very murky interpersonal existence, and could end up in an 'industrial tribunal' if you were not careful. While the stories did not openly recommend that one find an individual niche within the organization, looking around and seeing how people behaved did not take long to establish that this was both the most

preferred and the most available option.

Stories-in-use at other organizations had a similar impact. The story at TBP about the police raids of the past quickly transmitted a number of features and qualities of the culture. Most importantly, this story, which by the time of my visit had the quality of a legend about it, encapsulated the idea that TBP had significant and tangible enemies, and it firmly established that confronting this sort of prejudice was a key reason for the existence of the organization. Also embedded in the legend were messages about the dominant value system regarding motivation and work behaviour. Anyone hearing, through this story, how people worked half the night and most of the weekend, would quickly learn that this sort of behaviour was admirable and welcomed. Another important message encapsulated in the legend was about the meaning of co-operation. Only as a group could homosexuals confront and mount an attack against the hostile world at its doorsteps. Individuals could be abused and hauled away, as had happened at the bath raids, but through an organized co-operative effort the 'beast' could be held at bay and possibly overcome.

At SCM, there were stories about baby-sitting each other's children, sending flowers to a sick co-worker, and counselling a co-worker when a personal relationship was troubling; all had the effect of reinforcing and establishing that the organization was a friendly, warm place that valued the personal dimension. SCM was constructed as a family, and had lots of folklore to prove that this was the case.

In addition to the stories and legends that transmitted powerful messages, group members maintained and sustained the organization

through the use of specialized preselection and hiring techniques. Particularly at SCM and DEC, new members joined via friendship networks in which they had been substantially preselected (at DEC this was more evident at the subunit level). At TBP, which had a more open system on the surface, the idea of preselection was, nonetheless, operative. New people found themselves confronted with several 'selection' hurdles before they were more fully part of the group. While anyone in the gay community could volunteer to work at TBP, getting into the middle and inner circles was restricted to people who could establish congruence with the underlying values - David's quick rise to prominence in the organization being illustrative.

Maintenance of the culture was also achieved through mechanisms designed to convince deviants they should alter their ways or leave the organization. At TBP, for example, some volunteers were left to fend for themselves while others acquired important roles within the subgroups or overall collective. Although the official line stated that, 'we have never really dealt adequately with volunteers', the reality was that volunteers were prejudged and preselected, and, if they slipped through the preselection by mistake, were subject to various forms of ostracization. Those who were found wanting, socially or politically, were either ignored, not given any work, or relegated to jobs like distribution where their impact would be minimal (and possibly so boring that they would leave altogether). Even when serious 'personnel mistakes' were made, TBP had found ways of dealing with them, in spite of the observations of some members to the contrary. Gerald called it 'the freeze-out'; Ken told the story about a person 'who had

chopped their own head off', when referring to someone who had made it to the paid staff but did not conform to the hard work ethos. Even at NCDA, people who 'went too far' were eventually dealt with. As Richard told me: 'I was kicked out because I was a workaholic'. The performance appraisal system offered the opportunity to clarify boundaries, including those that should not be crossed. In it was a powerful tool for encouraging compliance - let us not forget that Lucia's probation was extended.

Another way in which the culture was maintained and sustained was through a process of socialization, what Ott (1989) calls, 'people processing'. In most of these groups, of course, as I have already indicated, people were selected in advance for cultural congruence - SCM being the most pronounced example. In this way, people usually joined these groups with values and beliefs that were more or less established as congruent and could be built upon and reinforced. This was true at DEC, where people were recruited to work in a specialized work area and the subgroup had the final word in deciding who would 'fit in'. Once on site, as Richard in the film department learned,

> you have to learn the political vocabulary. What you had was a group who were set in their ways; when new people come along they are expected to take on these values, even if it seems wierd.

Although none of these groups went so far as to use a formal orientation or indoctrination programme such as one might find in other settings, early socialization patterns had the same effect. At TBP, for example, a newcomer would soon have learned that it was important to work on, or at least be seen on, the weekend in order not to risk marginalization. Not only that, a newcomer would soon learn that

working long hours was something to brag about rather than complain about (this of course was changing by the end of my visit). In addition, getting socialized at TBP also involved learning what was 'really' important - things like finesse in writing and debate. At the same time, being socialized to TBP also taught that life could be fun if you played your cards right. For example, getting on The Body Politic party-circuit, which was tantamount to a vote of confidence, subsequently provided access to some of what Gerald might call 'Toronto's premier group of fags'.

If there was structural change at all through this period in the groups being considered here, it has been in the move towards greater specialization. And it is in this movement that I see a threat to the maintenance of a unified co-operative culture. At DEC and TBP, the organization of the work became more and more decentralized and specialized. The development of subgroups was very much in keeping with decisions that had been taken at stage two to provide scope for individual talents, interests and differences. At SCM, the organization of the work continued to occur within a framework of job rotation, although with a degree of differentiation to allow room for what Bev called, 'a little area in which to specialize and show their stuff'. At NCDA, the work became more and more specialized as well, but here around individuals, reflecting the perceived 'realities' about the nature of people who found their way to the organization.

Although a similar pattern of decentralization had developed in each organization, its role in maintaining and sustaining the culture of each organization was somewhat different. In every case, a division of

labour and worker specialization was linked to individual job satisfaction, and a productive, efficient approach to getting the work done. Beyond this, though, overall generalizations are less appropriate. At TBP and DEC, the development of subgroups also provided a way of coping with conflict and created a world where workers could more fully enact and experience co-operation within a smaller, more cohesive, reference group. At DEC, for example, the decentralized approach went so far as to 'legitimize' what they called, 'mini-collectives', or in the words of one worker-observer, 'mini-DEC's'. At NCDA, the ever increasing amount of job specialization meant that workers could actually avoid each other for a great deal of the time if they believed this to be necessary, which it seems they did.

While the decentralization of work activities provided many advantages for all of the organizations - not the least of which was cultural stability - it also had the effect of reinforcing less desireable aspects of the culture (what I earlier referred to as the shadow-side) or eroding the unified culture altogether. In particular, decentralization often created 'pockets of influence' and had the effect of working against integrating the whole. As a result, a cultural paradox was created. While decentralization had the effect of establishing settings in which co-operative working could be 'reasonably' enacted, it also created the setting in which it could be eroded or compromised. As a result, what seemed to foster co-operation in the short term was capable of having the opposite effect in the longer term.

Nevertheless, the maintenance-and-sustenance phase does sometimes

include attention to mechanisms for integrating the whole. At TBP, integration of the whole was facilitated by the absolute necessity of co-operation for the production of the newspaper. Without each person and each subunit actively committed to the whole, the organization would not achieve its central goal. An equally crucial factor in integration was the long-standing agreement about external enemies. As a result of these two factors - the interdependence of the work units and the agreement about sticking together to confront the enemy - there was inherent in the culture at TBP a basic commitment to the whole and an agreement about the desirability and meaning of co-operation.

On the surface, the ethos at DEC came to have many similarities to TBP. A critical difference, however, can be noticed in the absence of work routines that required interdependence. At DEC, each subunit evolved into highly autonomous entities, with their own products, clients and incomes. Holding the overall group together, therefore, required more attention to persuasive and social factors than was the case at TBP, and this begins to explain some of the cultural differences between the two organizations. DEC met as a group much more frequently than TBP, and one meeting a month was designed to be highly social - dinner at a co-worker's home. Although DEC developed in a decentralized form, they found that integrating the whole required attention to special central structures. As the years passed, the organization found that more and more formal co-ordination and central administration was 'tentatively negotiated' to keep everything from falling apart, since meetings, 'goodwill' and social get-togethers had proved inadequate to protect the more financially-vulnerable subunits and maintain a sense of

unity. But this created a dilemma for the culture. While increase in the centralized structure made 'rational' sense, it was viewed by many people with suspicion, since it seemed contrary to the principle of egalitarianism. As a result, it seemed impossible to reach a consensus on the desirability and purpose of a central administrative office.

Developments at NCDA took an altogether different path. Here, there is evidence of a culture with the ability to weather recurring storms and upsets without the dislocation or reconstruction of its core values and beliefs. Experience had taught that neither clients nor workers could be relied upon to make a long term commitment to the organization. Clients could be on site one day and gone the next, never to be heard from again. Many of the reasons that clients disappeared related to problems in the socially- and economically-depressed neighborhood, and workers felt powerless against these odds. In order to compensate, some workers merely left and others carved out roles where they could experience at least some small measure of success and job satisfaction. Thus, at Newham, there came to be much more individual role specialization than in any of the other groups. Each job was highly individualized, as were job descriptions. Formal rules were developed, although not always used, for recruitment of staff and for integrating the whole. Not all workers could learn to accept these rules, and some left, while others found ways to abuse the ambiguous control patterns, knowing that the workgroup would rarely expel or seriously censure a co-worker.

Thus, NCDA came to have a lack of group cohesion but for quite different reasons than DEC. At Newham, co-operative working had come to

mean a distant and elusive goal, rather than something that was actually in place. The nature of the clients, the nature of the highly individualized work routines, and the ambiguities to do with control, all conspired to separate, rather than integrate, the group.

SCM had the least problems with integration. It evolved into an organization having only a modest division of labour, with the primary integrating mechanism continuing to be social interaction. Conflict and disagreement was much less the norm at SCM, and workers, even after twelve years of operation, pictured themselves as a big, happy family. They met after work, helped to mind each other's children and genuinely seemed to like each other's company. A friendship network for selection helped to ensure that new people shared this vision. For SCM, more than other groups, co-operative working was constructed as a social arrangement in which interpersonal harmony was central. As a result, SCM clearly passed through a stage of differentiation, but made somewhat different choices from TBP and DEC - choices that appeared to have reduced some of the problems that might otherwise have occurred to do with integrating the whole.

By way of summary, the third developmental stage is characterized by a stable culture that is capable of resisting change. For most of the groups, negotiating social and structural arrangements that catered to internal and external demands had not been easy, and for better or worse, the culture had become fixed. Along the way, compromises may have been made and these gradually become part and parcel of the taken-for-granted assumptions about reality. While the meaning of a co-operative spirit differs at this stage for each group, it continues to

have some features in common. Perhaps we should exclude SCM, but at every other location, conflict has been legitimized and accepted as the way it is in co-ops. Conflict and co-operation are seen as going hand-in-hand. Most people have come to believe that in co-operative organizations, people can bicker, argue and disagree openly and that this is not necessarily indicative of a serious problem. What has become a much more serious problem at this stage, for some groups, is a deterioration or erosion of their overall co-operative spirit. Co-operation may still be the prevailing spirit at the subunit level, but it may have weakened considerably as the overall approach to group life.

One of the results that can be observed in the cases is that individuals and subgroups can construct separate interpretations of the organization. Within the framework of autonomy that has been created, it is quite possible for people to attach different meanings to the role and purpose of the organization. Perhaps the most dramatic example is at DEC, where an entire new subunit (for concerts and cultural events) was launched in the absence of an organization-wide consensus. Although everyone had found a way to live with a certain degree of unequal influence, and had learned to accept the imperfections of the collective decision making process, for many people this development had taken things too far. The <u>actual</u> emergence of a new unit, without a consensus about its appropriateness, made the espoused values about collective decision-making ring quite hollow. This 'awakening' to a new reality, and the thoughts and feelings it engenders, marks the beginning of a different phase in organizational life - a phase that re-evokes many of the qualities characteristic of stage two. Indeed, in several

of the cases presented in this study, this awakening seemed to be happening with an abrupt thud. Stage four is aroused by a crisis.

9.5 Stage Four: Maturity, Reconstitution or Conclusion

Most writers have noted that cultural transformation in the mature organization is unlikely to occur without overwhelming and life-threatening economic difficulty, significant change in the needs of individual workers, large numbers of new personnel or major inter-unit conflict. According to Schein (1985:285):

> In organizational midlife the culture may be able to accommodate, even expect, individual clashes, because it may be built on assumptions of individual competitiveness. Only when the integrity of the total culture is called into question by competing subcultures is there a potential cultural problem.
>
> When a group first forms, its evolving culture creates a stable, predictable environment and provides meaning, identity, and a communication system. That same group many generations later may find that its culture has become so well embedded, so traditional, that it serves only to reinforce the assumptions and values of the older, more conservative elements in the group. Under these conditions, a rebellious counterculture often is created...and the total group culture begins to suffer from loss of integrity.

In the absence of a major threat or crisis, the mature form might well go on for a very long period. Three of the groups in this study, though, had reached a transformative moment at the time of my research. As I have indicated in my updates, both SCM and TBP disappeared, at least in the form they had acquired. SCM and TBP there had been experiencing significant financial crises, but that alone does not account for their decision to terminate. Both organizations, for different reasons, were once again in a state of 'reality shock', and neither survived intact. DEC, too, had entered a new 'reality shock' of

transformative proportions.

By 1986, SCM was confronting a severe economic crisis - this cold, hard fact could not be denied. Negotiations, as a result, seemed to lose some of their friendly quality, and radical new ideas began to emerge in the minds of individuals and ultimately in the mind of the group. What to do?: move to an new location; close the store; amalgamate with another store; look for another job?

In spite of these difficulties, the organization seemed reluctant to change in ways that might modify its culture. The group remained committed to their goal of providing specialized print materials within a friendly, co-operative community, and was reluctant to adjust in ways that would compromise these values. As it had in stage two, SCM seemed to reaffirm its culture, reluctant to alter its underlying beliefs, even against the odds of an economic crisis with the power to close down the store. For this group, a co-operative spirit and co-operative working was about a way of life as much as running a business. In their view, adaptation to external pressures meant giving up the democratic, peaceful and serene culture they had for so long enjoyed. It was my view that the group had tacitly agreed to a process of decline which might ultimately lead to a conclusion of the business, and workers did not seem to reject my interpretation when I presented it to them. Some commentators might see this as a failure in adaptation, but to this group I think it was merely a recognition that the organization was near the end of its life-cycle - sad and nostalgia-evoking as that reality might have been.

TBP had also reached a point of decline by the time I arrived to do

my research. Once again, the people themselves, through the articles they wrote, provide a moving account of the end. In the last issue of The Body Politic magazine (Issue 135), one person wrote that he believed the organization had 'simply outlived its usefulness'. In the same issue, in a long and introspective article, Rick wrote:

> For a time the purpose and quality of The Body Politic was clear. But both were becoming more vague to us and it seems, to our readers. Writers whom we'd counted on for years were drifting away. Some couldn't afford to write for free any more. And still others simply lost interest in what the magazine had become. We knew because we'd ask, and they'd say so.
>
> I know some people are angry at the decision we made, some resentful, some feeling robbed of a resource we'd led them to believe they could take for granted. But mostly people say to me: 'Yes, its sad, but it was time.'

Speaking out through the same final issue, Gerald had this to say: 'I can't explain why it happened; I'm too close; too tired.' The last issue did not even have an editorial - perhaps The Body Politic collective had finally run out of words.

As well, other factors had come into play at TBP that help to explain their transition from stage three to four. Not only were the 'old' staff tired, and perhaps reacting to the absence of a crisis to rally around, but also new staff were challenging many of the assumptions that held the organization together. In the case study, I profiled Lee - a fairly new worker - and her perceptual position was fairly typical. Lee indicated that she was committed to a broader range of social causes than gay liberation, and that she was unprepared to devote all of her energies to a single issue. For her, this meant that she was disinclined to work the fifty-plus hours a week that was the norm at TBP. In addition, in her mind, life also had to include

attention to personal goals such as further education. While TBP had been a singular and all-encompassing activity for founders and their disciples, for Lee this approach was too narrow and limiting. Andrew, the newest member of the paid staff, expressed a similar view - TBP was important, but not, in his mind, the only reason for living and working. In the short term perhaps it was, but not as a life long commitment.

While new staff at TBP 'took on' stories and legends from the past, they did not 'absorb' the messages in quite the way that people had in the past. As Lee said, 'I was just a kid when the bath raids were taking place; they are part the history of this movement, but not part of my personal history'. Similarly, Andrew pictured himself as 'a kid from Scarborough watching TV'. The stories and legends, as a result, seemed to be losing some of their power to instill and reinforce values and assumptions.

A sense of reality shock at TBP was also evident in ways other than my observation that workers seemed less willing to work long hours for low wages to the exclusion of additional political and personal interests. The patterns of influence and decision making were also being perceived as problematic. Although the culture of TBP incorporated agreements about the reality of unequal participation and influence, by 1989 more and more people 'experienced' that some sort of threshold had been crossed. Ken's behaviour seemed to symbolize for many people the undesirable degree to which individuals not only could, but would, operate autonomously from the collective. In addition, Andrew's perception of himself as 'a nonentity' in the organization was shared, albeit somewhat less strongly, by a growing number of others.

While there had always been 'nonentities' at TBP (partly by design), never before had it become such a problem, and never before had it permeated to the level of paid staff. While the 'flurry of memos' continued to be operative, it is important to note who was and who was not involved. In the 'house-boy' example, not one of the newer staff wrote a memo, and in the 'porn video' example, the decision making was largely confined to a subsection of the inner circle. By this stage in TBP's biography, it was beginning to appear to people that even those in the inner circle were less than equal.

Perhaps the situation at TBP can best be understood by its reluctance to engage with a so-called 'organizational review'. The fact that the organization had come to the realization that it 'needed' a review, combined with the fact that everyone was avoiding 'it', suggests two things. First, I think we can take from this that people were aware that something important had changed in the culture of the organization, and that renegotiation was required at a deep rather than a superficial level. Second, I think we can reasonably conclude that people actually did not want to enter a major renegotiating process. Especially in the absence of a unifying crisis around which to rally, what was TBP anyway?

Some of the people I talked to after TBP had published its last issue suggested to me that it should have died years before; that at best it was an anachronism. Others said it should have got its act together and started publishing a glossy, less intellectual magazine - one with lots of 'hot' photographs and plenty of film reviews. But I think the collective wisdom at TBP thought it best to let some other group serve that market. The very fragile co-operative spirit they had

created might well have not survived without the strong political thrust of the newspaper. As with SCM, I think that the majority of people associated with the organization believed that it had reached the end of its life-cycle and favoured a peaceful conclusion.

At DEC, pressures for change were quite different. The combination of growth, expansion, relocation and diversification provided ample triggers and motivation for a major reassessment. DEC was clearly not dying or in a state of decline; it was on the upswing. Part and parcel of the 'tangible' changes, though, were changes at a deeper level. More and more participants were feeling incongruity between the previously negotiated 'order of things' and their experience of reality. Not only that, but new people in the organization were openly challenging many of the dominant values and assumptions underlying the culture.

As we saw in the case study, Karen (the 'MBA'), Debbie (the 'co-ordinator'), Richard (the 'filmmaker'), Johnathan (the 'founder') and Todd and Margie (the 'book distributors'), all had much to say about their experience of a changed and changing DEC on the one hand, and about their proposals for even more change on the other. Karen and Debbie were casting a vote for a more business-like organization which would include a stronger central 'management' unit; Richard's views were typical of support at the subunit level for a similar proposal; Johnathan's views and behaviour were symbolic of a view that DEC's future needed to include a re-engagement with values from the past; and Margie and Todd's experience was typical of the perception that the actual reality of DEC was rubbing abrasively against its 'espoused reality'.

Whatever perspective was in use by individuals at DEC, my observations confirmed that something had changed, or needed changing. The new building, the new accounting system, the new subunit for organizing concerts, the plans for an auditorium, the mixture of apathy and anger about the overall decision making processes, the growing rivalries between the subunits, and the fact of Johnathan's alienation, were, among other things, unavoidable evidence that DEC had made a quantum leap of departure from what it had been. The champagne celebrations accompanying the opening of the new offices, as a result, crystallized for everyone that DEC was no longer what it had been.

As with stage two, this stage in DEC's biography had the character of a transition. I came to understand that the beginning of this phase, which probably occurred a few months before my visits, had its roots mainly in the minds of individuals. Gradually, though, as the sense of reality shock escalated, it began to take shape in the mind of the group, made quite obvious to me by the many, many times I heard the rhetorical remark, 'What is DEC?' Many people I talked with at DEC seemed to believe that the structural and social systems that had previously held them together - imperfect as they might have been - had somehow become dysfunctional. Richard talked of the lack of a 'common mind'; Karen talked of a 'certain meanness and selfishness'; Margie spoke of a vague sense of 'loss' she experienced. In my conversations with organizational participants, I acquired a view that they felt confused and insecure. Some people were wondering out loud if they should even be together at all. Those who wanted to stay together - and this was a majority - felt a very strong need for leadership,

co-ordination and cohesion; most felt that the organization was due for, and in the process of, a complete rethink.

To my mind, DEC was back, developmentally-speaking, where it had been much earlier in its history - back to a stage of building a workable culture, only this time rebuilding, reconstructing, and deconstructing. As they began to find that the previously constructed slogans and myths were ringing more and more falsely, a search was initiated for new values, beliefs and assumptions. Although my formal research concluded before this reconstruction was complete, there was evidence to suggest that the group would delegate formal administrative power to a manager, reflecting a move to a more hierarchical form of organization. And, as I recounted in the case study update, this seems to have been what did in fact happen.

The literature on worker co-operatives would have us believe that such a move represented 'degeneration'. I would argue, however, based on the experience of DEC, that such a move could reignite, rather than extinguish, their co-operative spirit. By this point, they were a group of twenty quite diverse people divided into six autonomous departments, and they needed a central rallying point - something to represent the totality of DEC and to help unite the units. There seemed to be a perceptual shift about how a co-operative workplace could be managed. If someone had suggested the establishment of a formal office for co-ordination and administration at an earlier period in DEC's history, it probably would have been perceived as incongruous with their meaning of co-operative working. Fifteen years on, however, the creation of such a unit began to seem more and more compatible with the way in which co-

operative working arrangements could be enacted.

On the face of it, Newham CDA was also at a transformative point during my research period. Four new staff in a group of just six, changes in the work routines, tension between workers and the planning committee, and significant disappointments and failures with the client population, might lead most observers to suspect and predict that a cultural shift was in the making. Closer inspection, however, leads me to believe that this was not the case. My engagement with NCDA as an employee-researcher gave me a very deep, personal sense of the culture and from this dual perspective I came to believe that Newham was merely displaying one of its cultural qualities - the ability to pick up the pieces after one of its recurring crises, and reconstitute itself in more or less the same form. The events that took place at NCDA during my visit might well have been the sort of triggers to change that could have shifted the culture of an organization such as TBP, DEC or SCM into a fourth developmental phase, but, I would argue, not at Newham. NCDA, I would suggest, continued to be at a stage where its culture was very resilient indeed.

From these experiences we can see that a fourth developmental stage in the life-cycle of worker-managed organizations is less predictable than other developmental stages, but like the others it has parallels in the development of other types of organizations. Schein (1985:288), for example, has found that change at this stage in the life of an organization occurs, '[only] through scandal and explosion of myths...nothing changes until the consequences of the [actual] theory-in-use creates a public and visible scandal that cannot be hidden'.

Stage four, as a result, is usually introduced through a series of tumultuous events, even though the genesis of these events may have been brewing for several months, and possibly years. This may culminate in a decision to conclude the business - a recognition that the end has come - or it may signal the beginning of a rethink and ultimately the renegotiation of new shared values and beliefs. At TBP and SCM it took the former course, and at DEC it took the latter.

9.6 Conclusions

As I have outlined in Chapter 8, much literature suggests that worker co-operatives will not succeed. Some writers tell us that workgroups of this type - noble as they may be - will degenerate into the forms they have rejected. More optimistic commentators argue that degeneration many be avoidable, and recommend strategies to that end. By using the less dogmatic analytical framework of change and development, I believe that I have encouraged the organizations to 'speak' in a way that is much more instructive. With the aid of this analytical tool, I have been able to discover the change process while at the same time avoiding the 'obligation' of labeling this experience as good or bad, right or wrong.

Still, at the end of this analysis, one might ask: just what is a co-operative spirit, and when is it present or not present? Although I have based my analysis on a view that a co-operative spirit is uniquely expressed and enacted in each group, operating at the level of culture, I suggest that there are some general lessons about co-operative working that can be distilled from my research. The next chapter sets out to

explore some of these lessons.

CHAPTER 10

CO-OPERATIVE SPIRIT: TOWARD A SYNTHESIS

10.1 Introduction

My findings suggest that the nature of a co-operative spirit varies from one group to another, and from one time period to another within the same group. My research also suggests that the meaning attached to co-operative working can vary from one individual to another within the same workgroup. In addition, the information I have collected suggests that a co-operative spirit can be enacted within a variety of organizational forms. At SCM Bookroom, it found a place within a relatively homogenious workgroup which emphasized job rotation, whereas at TBP it found a place within a more heterogeneous workgroup with a high degree of task specialization and division of labour.

However much a co-operative spirit is conceived of as a 'moving target', organizational participants themselves can isolate those times and places where co-operation is perceived to be the 'reality' from those times and places where it is perceived to be weak or hardly present at all. As we have seen, workers have strong feelings and views about when they are or are not working co-operatively. At The Body Politic, for example, even though most workers tended to report that they experienced an overall co-operative ethos, and many of my observations led me to reach the same conclusion, there were times and situations when workers perceived that people were working in opposition to and competition with each other. Particularly by the fourth stage of

organizational development, the perception of members was that co-operation was less and less the dominant characteristic of their organization.

At Newham Co-operative Development Agency, on the other hand, workers were more continuously preoccupied with a perception that there was an absence of co-operation, and tended to base their actions on this assumption. For workers such as Bob, Anne, Cathy and myself, there seemed to be few moments that were typical of co-operative working, regardless of the somewhat different meanings we might have attached to the idea. The co-operative response involved in getting the annual report to the borough Council was perceived and experienced as the exception rather than the rule.

Workers at DEC, at least by the time of my visits, tended to characterize their organization as less than co-operative, dwelling on their perception of an eroded collective decision-making process and inter-unit competition to make their point. These reports, however, were almost always accommpanied by memories of more co-operative times in the past, and an assertion that DEC could have a co-operatively stable future. It was also true that workers believed that co-operation persisted at the subunit level. Members of DEC clearly believed that it was well within their 'power' to enact a co-operative spirit, even if it was temporarily not what they experienced.

I believe that there are a couple of very important overall lessons to be learned from the information I have collected. The first lesson is that organizational participants themselves 'know' when they are or are not working co-operatively, and often have considerable insight into

the factors that influence their positive or negative experiences. As a researcher, then, it is not necessary for me to create externally-produced definitions, typologies or labels about what co-operation at work is 'really about'. The second lesson is that there are some general things we can learn from this pool of 'knowledge' about what seems to make the experience of co-operation more likely in all its variegated forms. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize this information and reflect it against some of the information I have obtained from the literature.

10.2 The Meanings Attached to Co-operative Working

My research has highlighted a variety of meanings that are attached and applied to the term, 'co-operation at work'. In previous chapters, I have considered meanings that are evident in the literature, that come from the experience of workgroups themselves, and that come from my own reflection. In this section, I will review these various meanings with a view to illustrating that the tendency in the worker co-operative literature to 'stabilize' and 'universalize' the meaning of co-operative working is misdirected.

Carter (1987:366) provides a very insightful summary of the way in which worker co-operatives have been conceptualized by most researchers.

> The co-operative literature is characterized by a near universal non-polyvalency: most works tend to reify the co-operative form by attributing it with a preordained objective reality.

Carter goes on to say that most commentators have 'objectified' worker co-operatives as an 'unstable form that must become a conventional business' (the degeneration thesis), or as an organizational form that

can only 'exist' if it is able to fully realize some preconceived notion (by the reseacher) of democracy.

Carter's points, in my view, are well taken and are lent additional support by my research. In the introduction to my thesis, I outlined the considerable body of 'typological' literature devoted to framing worker co-operatives within restrictive schemata based mainly on structural characteristics. In these typologies, co-ops are deemed to 'exist' if they meet particular legal, ownership, financial or organizational structure criteria, usually without any reference to what these organizations might actually be like on the inside. Additionally, most researchers begin their investigations with carefully predefined notions about the meaning of co-operative working, and conclude with strong opinions either about why it is doomed to failure, or about the sort of preconditions and facilitators by which it can be maintained. Note should be taken, nontheless, that there is a growing number of scholars who approach worker co-operatives with a more open mind, and reference cultural factors when reporting their findings.

As I outlined in Chapter 7, the meaning of co-operation that I (unconsciously) brought into my research emphasized interpersonal factors. I began my field work with an embedded pattern of meanings that suggested working co-operatively would or should emphasize warm, helping, friendly and harmonious human relationships. I soon learned, though, that my meanings were not necessarily compatible with those in use, either by other researchers, or by co-operatively-managed workgroups themselves. I discovered that some researchers, and some organizations (such as SCM and QD), did emphasize interpersonal factors

similar to the ones I 'valued', but I quickly learned that this was not always the case in other settings or with other researchers. Gradually, I was I was able to be more open to other views.

I learned that co-operation was a complex and dynamic phenomenon. I discovered that it could mean something different to individuals and subgroups within the same organization, that there were quite distinct differences in meaning between organizations, and that the meaning of co-operative working could vary from one time period to another within the same organization. Just as importantly, I learned that co-operation was not a 'thing' and had the character of a spirit.

In these organizations, we can see that workers characterize co-operative working as having to do with voluntarily helping each other, either to get the work done or to meet a political agenda, such as was the case at TBP. In the data that I have gathered, we can see that workers are most likely to report co-operative experiences when they perceive the process of decision making to be mainly open and equal, and when major policies are being decided on by the whole group. Co-operation is also reported to be the dominant tone when workers have a strong sense of needing each other, a feeling that may emerge when the group seems to be confronted by external enemies (TBP), or when group members 'need' each other for social reasons (SCM).

Workers often conceptualize co-operation as occurring in an environment in which there is room for conflict and individual differences, but in situations in which these problems do not result in a disabling breakdown of communications or displacement of key goals. A co-operative spirit, by the second and third stages of development, is

often seen to be compatible with quite significant differences in personality and working styles, especially if other factors such as shared agreements about external enemies are present. Also, workers can report a sense of there being a co-operative spirit in situations in which there is some inequality in decision making: there are thresholds, but these can allow considerable latitude. There need not even be a full consensus about the meaning of co-operation itself, especially after the negotiating processes of stage two have taken place - ways can be found to accommodate a variety of interpretations as long as these share at least some common ground. One of the ways this accommodation to individual differences seems to take place is through the creation of cohesive subgroups.

On the other hand, we can also piece together some of the general situations in which co-operation is perceived by members to be highly compromised or not present at all. In particular, workers report and experience a high level of unco-operativeness when they perceive people not to be helping each other, or when members are perceived to be working at cross purposes with different goals and purposes. One example that stood out for me is when workers, such as Richard at DEC and Anne at NCDA, expressed the view that the group was 'stuck' and seemed to lack a 'common mind' or 'common view'. Another example, again drawn from DEC, was when individual members, such as Margie in book distribution, report feeling 'removed' or 'alienated' from important decisions. At NCDA, the feelings and thoughts expressed by Bob, Anne and Cathy, that some people viewed their work as 'just a job', provided powerful and thought-provoking glimpses into their perception that co-

operation was 'on their mind', but 'not in their experience'.

10.3 The Maintenance and Decline of a Co-operative Spirit

Using the meanings that participants themselves attach to co-operative working, I believe it is possible to isolate a few of the elements and circumstances which appear to influence the maintenance or decline of a co-operative spirit. Even when we acknowledge that the clustering of elements and conditions that appear nourishing for one workgroup might be impossible to replicate or might well have a somewhat different impact in another, we can still explore some of the situational factors that appear to lead to positive and negative perceptions of co-operative working. Although it is not my intention to offer a recipe book about how to manage an organization co-operatively, it occurs to me that there are some general categories of factors that surface time and time again, and that do suggest some of the important ingredients. These categories of factors are:

1) historical context;
2) characteristics of the individual;
3) characteristics of the group;
4) the organization of the work;
5) economic viability;
6) ownership and control of the workplace.

10.3.1 Historical context

The literature suggests that some historical moments seem more

conducive to the formation of worker-managed organizations than others, either by providing support or oppositional opportunities. Such moments might occur at any time, but in this study we have seen that the late 1960, early 1970 period provided a particularly fertile mix of social, political and economic factors for the start-up of the three Toronto groups. These were the days when the personal became political, and, for many young visionaries, so did the organizational. The social support for radical protest and anti-establishment views was clearly a stimulant to the creation of organizations such as TBP, SCM and DEC. Parallels can be drawn to the early 1980's in London. At the time Newham Co-operative Development Agency came into being, every borough in Greater London was setting-up just such an Agency. Funds and encouragement were in ample supply for new approaches to community and workplace development. Other types of worker co-operatives might emerge in response to plant closures and worker buy-outs, and these precipitating factors might occur at any moment in time, but my field work has not given me access to these types of groups.

The historical moment also seems relevant in the decline of these groups. If some times are more supportive and encouraging, and other times seem to provide clear-cut oppositional opportunities, still other times may be just the opposite. To talk of a collective approach to management in 1975 would have almost certainly received a nod of encouragement from fairly large segments of the population. To talk of such a thing in 1989, however, might be more likely to garner a look suggesting caution. The decline of a worker-managed organization would certainly be related to more factors than the presence or absence of a

supportive community base, but its presence might be the sort of thing a group needed to take the initial formative steps, or to get beyond difficult times.

As we have seen, however, the mere presence of a supportive community or subculture is not enough to ensure the survival of a group, not least because the support from these sources is highly fickle and unstable. Nevertheless, as stimulators to the creation and start-up of alternative managements, and perhaps to their decline, social supports and historical context obviously play a role. No more so, perhaps, then in shaping the meanings of co-operative working that are brought into the organizing endeavour, even though these meanings may undergo considerable renegotiation once the group is actually established.

TBP suggests another way in which the historical moment can be a powerful motive for working co-operatively. It is unlikely that an organization dedicated to the liberation of gay men and lesbians would have survived for very long in the early 1950's for example. By the same token, by the late 1980's, the gay liberation movement had become so diverse that no single organization could hope to bring together, in co-operative unity, all its various constituencies. The sense of oppression that existed in the early 1970's, combined with the willingness of more and more gay people to 'come out' politically and socially, combined with a heightened level of awareness about human rights issues generally, all came together to incubate and strengthen TBP as a co-operative community effort. (This should not be overstated, however, because even in the 1970's and early 1980's, when the 'time' might have been 'ideal', these reports suggest that finding a sense of

co-operative unity was not all that easy).

In the groups I considered, the architects appear anomalous, and their formation seemed to have very little to do with anything that was going on (or not going on) outside their door. When they began in 1985, social and political support for co-ops was, if anything, on the decline, and there is no evidence to suggest that they had any particular quarrel with the outside world (remember, it was not part of their goal to change the ways of architecture, and they did not seem particularly opposed to other forms of organization). Quattro Design's birth was not related to a pressing desire to change the world, nor was it a response to economic hardship. Rather, the group was created by highly trained professionals who chose the co-operative 'option' as a way of running what might have been a successful small business in any event. For this group, the start-up seems more linked to a quest for self-actualization and personal fulfilment, and it reminds us to be attuned to motives that might reside within individuals, regardless of the historical epoch.

10.3.2 Characteristics of the individual

Some people more than others appear to be ready, willing and able to form or join co-operatively-managed organizations. At the same time, some of these people, once they are part of such a workgroup, find it is not to their taste and soon leave. What does the experience of these groups tell us about the nature of individuals who become part of and remain in co-operative work groups?

In the early life of these groups, the primary individual

motivation appears to be moral and political. These motives are often born out of and reinforced by membership in a subculture that is politically and morally in opposition to the larger society. The typical worker is young, idealistic, well educated, and often rebellious. These individuals are self-selecting and have deliberately chosen the co-operative option.

Gaining political power and resisting threats from external enemies is often a significant motivating force. For some individuals, co-operation and co-operative working is closely linked to obtaining power and influence in the outside world - power that would be next to impossible for an any one individual to obtain. For some founding members of a group, in fact, the motive to join may be more related to what the organization will do than to how it will do it, and sometimes these two factors can create conflict.. Once on site, and interaction commences, an individual may not be able to fit in or may find that co-operative working is not to his or her taste, even though he/she might well be passionately attached to the social change goals of the group. A person who is easily frustrated with group decision-making, and with the slowness inherent in a management system that encourages input from everyone, clearly is not the most appropriate type of person to work in a co-operative (Margie, from DEC, seems to typify this dilemma). For many members, however, co-operation is believed to be an appropriate way of working and, in some cases, a necessary antidote for dealing with common threats and enemies.

Perhaps the most potent message arising out of the early experiences of these groups is that individuals are also motivated to

form and join a co-operative workplace for social reasons - the motive is not always exclusively political. SCM provides the best example of a group of individuals who seemed to crave a community of kindred spirits, with shared values, dreams and aspirations, just as much as they wanted or needed other people for political reasons. In its early days, individuals at DEC also seemed to place great emphasis on the social advantages of their organization.

As time moves on, individual motives for joining and remaining can be seen to change, and the kinds of individual qualities that the group needs become different. The experience of these groups suggests that individuals, once on board, often find they prefer some tasks over others and seek change that will allow them some specialized role or function. Individuals begin to look to the work itself to provide a sense of purpose and ongoing job satisfaction, rather than, or in addition to, the overall organizational goals. These motives often contribute to a division of labour or role specialization, and when this happens, the group begins to need different responses and behaviours from the individual, and the meaning of co-operative working may change. In a situation where roles have become more differentiated, the group needs people who are able to do a specific job and still keep a sense of the whole - people who will continue to value the overall group and willingly share in the overall running of the enterprise. Not all founding members are able to make this transition, and new people can be recruited with more compatible needs and talents - specialist on the one hand, team player on the other. In the mature form, a co-operative spirit would appear to work best when there are individuals who have a

desire for team working, a preparedness to deal with the slowness of group decision-making, a willingness to weather difficult times and, at the same time, a readiness to subscribe to the broader social-political agendas of the group. Such perfectly formed individuals are seldom the 'reality' and selection compromises are made, usually in the direction of ideological congruence. The scarcity of people with the full range of skills and instincts often creates difficulties in maintaining co-operativeness. One group of people that is seldom mentioned in the literature as likely candidates for worker co-operatives are professionals. Lawyers, doctors and architects are usually assumed to prefer hierarchical partnerships. My observations of Quattro Design suggest that the professional make-up of this group of people had a close relationship to the meanings they constructed around co-operative working, and ultimately to their sense of a co-operative spirit. Their professional status and ethic meant that they were well-educated, hard-working and capable of working without direction - all factors conducive to a successful work environment, co-operative or otherwise. Forming a worker co-operative would almost certainly require other qualities, but the professional qualities that the founders of QD brought to the organization appeared to be advantageous. Interestingly, support for this idea is found with the Royal Institute of British Architects (1982) who have published a pamphlet advising architects about the co-operative option, although they do not provide any data about how many have exercised this option.

10.3.3 Characteristics of the Group

There are several factors cited in the literature concerning the sorts of group characteristics that tend to favour co-operation at work. The experience of the organizations in this study, however, suggest that generalizations about group qualities can oversimplify the complexity that is involved, and the diversity that results, when people come together to shape and enact a culture. Any observations at this level, as a result, need to be viewed as circumstantial and situational, and changing as the group matures. These groups suggest that there are no hard-and-fast rules about the mix of people that will end up 'finding' a co-operative spirit. Their experience also suggests that there are no clear cut ways that a group can behave and interact that will necessarily lead to a perception that a co-operative culture had been enacted. At the same time, though, a few ideas have emerged from within the research that are worth exploring a little further:

1) homogeneity of personality and skills;

2) presence or absence of a common bond;

3) size of the group.

In the beginning stage of development, all of the groups can be seen to favour homogeneity in membership. In most cases, the founding group consists of people who are already friends, often with similarity in personality and always with a similar world view. In addition, most groups recruit and select new members on the basis of friendship networks or from narrowly defined communities within the broader society. At the beginning, this emphasis on homogeneity seems to be appropriate and may be an important factor in determining whether or not

members feel they are working co-operatively. Part of the process of establishing a culture, however, may involve negotiations that lead people to believe they are less compatible and homogeneous than was originally imagined. Experience teaches that similarity and previously established friendships do not automatically translate into co-operative experiences. Even friends and those with similar world views, it seems, have to find ways of expressing and dealing with conflict as part of the enactment of a viable culture of collaboration.

As time goes on, most groups find adequate ways to tolerate and even celebrate diversity and conflict, often by normalizing outbursts and providing legitimate social space for individuals to be grumpy or depressed. In several of these groups, the organization of the work itself becomes a way of allowing for diversity, most groups creating a division of work that places like-minded people into smaller and usually more harmonious units. In the mature stage, recruitment begins to reflect these new perceptions about the nature of co-operative working, and selection of new staff may be substantially delegated to the smaller units. For the organization as a whole, then, homogeneity may be perceived to be less and less attainable, and, interestingly, less important as time goes on.

In other words, in the beginning stage a fairly high level of homogeneity may be highly appropriate and even necessary. As the group matures, however, it cannot only handle more diversity, it may actually require people with different skills and talents. But, as we have seen, diversity, division of labour and job specialization often bring with them a shadow-side that may cause goal confusion, along with co-

ordination and integration dilemmas.

To a degree, integration may continue to occur as a result of social bonds, political goals or the presence of a common threat, but for several of the groups in this study these factors seemed too weak or insufficient. With a mature group, the development of a psychological glue may require considerable attention to the negotiation of an 'organizational voice' - a voice that will speak on behalf of the entire group, and act as the central point to rally around. In addition, a group such as DEC, that came to favour a more decentralized model, may find the appointment of a co-ordinator becomes compatible with their meaning of co-operative working.

Another factor which appears to influence integration is size. Once a group grows beyond a dozen or so people, decision-making may be a very time consuming process, and it may be difficult for the group to maintain a sense of wholeness and oneness. There is a common wisdom and strong theme in the literature suggesting that co-operatively-managed groups should limit their growth (Rothschild and Whitt 1986), but I think that the experience of these groups makes such an ultimatum less cut and dried. Certainly, in a small group it is easier to know each other and to be aware of problems, but the groups I studied suggest that there are ways of organizing that can accommodate growth and enlargement, although increased size appears to produce other problems requiring special attention. In the larger groups, such as DEC and TBP, ways were found of organizing the group to accommodate size by the creation of subgroups. But, as we have seen, the behaviour of these subunits can have a pronounced impact on the overall level of

co-operation which can create a paradox. What leads to an experience of co-operation on the one hand, can work against it on the other. In order to counteract this tendency, some of these groups found that they had to pay even more attention to other integrating mechanisms, such as planned social events and additional meetings, but not always with success.

In more traditional settings, formal rules are often used to facilitate integration, but in these groups, rules and expected patterns of behaviour tend to be looser and often not made explicit. Some groups, such as NCDA, have gone to considerable effort to establish formal rules and procedures, but most have persistently eschewed the formalization of social codes, even though they exist at the level of 'norms'. As Richard from DEC told us, this 'sink or swim' approach to orientation and socialization can make life seem unsettling.

For most of the groups, the decision to formalize or leave informal the 'rules' and expectations is a bit of a conundruum. In interviewing workers, the topic of rules and standardization arose frequently and was almost always expressed as a dilemma for co-operative organizations. On the one hand, most participants assume that a co-operative workplace will provide them with considerable latitude insofar as such things as setting their own hours are concerned. On the other hand, they wonder about the ability of co-ops to enforce rules and tend to suggest that other more powerful factors come into play.

In some cases, it was my observation that making explicit the implicit and expected ways of behaving might actually be useful. At TBP, for example, there were many 'rules' just below the surface, but

new people and volunteers were required to divine these norms on their own and failure to grasp them quickly often meant that people left feeling angry and unwanted. It does seem to me that if codes of behaviour and work routines do exist and are important, they might as well be articulated for easy reference by all comers.

My personal view, though, is perhaps too simplistic. What seems to be the case, insofar as these five groups provide clues, is that the absence of hierarchical supervision means rules are difficult to enforce and, formal or otherwise, must reflect deeper values and beliefs. Whatever the degree of formality to do with rules and social codes, in these groups goodwill and common understandings remain the most powerful operational devices influencing workplace behaviour, and if these are weak then it stands to reason that a co-operative spirit may also be impoverished. Anne at NCDA expresses this view quite succintly when she says:

> It seems to me that Bob puts a lot of faith in establishing clear-cut rules, but I don't know if this will be effecive - who will act as the manager or enforcer? I believe there is something deeper needed to get all of this to work. This common ground has something to do with values I guess - something about all starting from, or being in, the same place. It has never been clear to me what holds us together - it's got to be something more than rules, don't you think?

Individuals from other organizations also express the need for a common bond or common mind - co-operation, they suggest, is linked to something more than rules and standardized procedures. What this common mind is, or what form it might take, however, appears to be unique to each group - the case study reports provide some sense of its special qualities for each group, but it has, as Anne said, a spiritual dimension and is not fully accessible for disection.

What emerges from the experience of these groups is the important, but changing, role that the mix of people plays in fostering the experience of a co-operative spirit that has vitality and integrity. What also emerges is that few categorical guidelines can be formulated about what particular mix of people, or what particular characteristics of the group will be effective. Size is clearly important but even along this dimension we have an example of one group of twenty people (DEC) who have experienced some success in maintaining co-operation.

10.3.4 Organization of the work

One of the most powerful lessons I have drawn from these groups is the degree to which co-operative experiences can be linked to the organization of the work. At the start-up stage, every group equated co-operative working with the establishment of equal tasks or roles - achieved through a simple rotation of the work. In the longer term (ignoring QD for the moment), only SCM maintained job rotation as the guiding principle for getting the work done. In fact, when I began my research at SCM the first thing that I was shown was the large job rotation schedule on the wall - the embodiment of how they worked co-operatively and a powerful symbol about the way in which they had constructed their culture. Other groups, though, found this kind of work arrangement failed to provide sufficient job satisfaction, and that it was an inefficient way to get things done. Interestingly, at TBP, the division of the work into interdependent units seemed to actually foster a co-operative and collaborative culture. At DEC and NCDA, on the other hand, the work was divided in a way that required little

mutual dependence and, as a result, co-operation depended much more on individual and voluntary choice. At DEC, each subunit stood to loose resources by co-operating, and at NCDA each person could easily head off in a different direction without reference to the whole. Consequently, other facilitators to a co-operative spirit had to be exceptionally strong and persuasive to counteract the competitive and individualistic tendencies inherent in the work routines. Until its very late history, DEC seemed able to manage these problems, but increasingly felt a need for formal co-ordination and administration. NCDA, on the other hand, had never been able to locate powerful social integrators, and, for this and other reasons, workers were more preoccupied with the degree to which co-operation was largely absent from the ambience.

The experience of these groups provides several key lessons by demonstrating the powerful influence that work routines can have on the development and maintenance of a co-operative spirit. A division of labour appears to be a good and even natural solution to getting the work done in a way that meets the talents and motives of individuals and at the same time facilitates efficiency. With a division of labour, however, comes the potential for serious threats to co-operation. If a division of labour fails to foster and encourage mutual dependence - if there is no necessity to co-operate or if there are no rewards for co-operation built into the work routines - then competition and individualism may be the undesirable outcomes. What I have learned is that in order to counter these problems, the organization needs to pay considerable attention to those other factors that will foster integration and bolster feelings of dependence and togetherness.

10.3.5 Economic viability

Unavoidably linked to a group's ability to find and sustain a co-operative ethos are factors to do with the economic vitality of the enterprise. Setting-up or trying to sustain a co-operatively-managed business in a highly competitive sector of the market place, for example, may be unwise. If other firms organized along traditional lines are prepared to do whatever is necessary to make a profit and edge out competition, an organization that is committed to equal wages and spends considerable time in making decisions, may have the economic cards stacked against it from the beginning. SCM, in its later years, poignantly illustrates this conundrum. As a result, in a capitalist economy, some business sectors may be highly risky for worker co-operatives.

Nevertheless, to frame this economic dilemma as a universal condition is wrong. Some groups in this study appeared able to survive economically even in sectors that are known for their high amount of competition - QD being the most notable example. Perhaps a few of their clients were attracted to the organization because they knew and trusted the staff or because it was a worker co-operative, but other reasons must surely account for their economic vitality. Their skill as architects and their client-based approach to the work doubtlessly were other important factors. While a worker co-operative has some unique properties that may lead customers to its doors, in the longer term it is the ability of the business to do a good job that is probably more important to financial success.

Most organizations in this study, however, have aided their

survival by establishing themselves in specialized niches with limited competition. TBP's main product was the publication of two newspapers, each designed to appeal to a specific market, much of it untapped by other publishers. The two publications had at their peak over 10,000 readers, and for a long time this readership was loyal. Also crucial to the economic viability of TBP was their access to volunteers. Without twenty or more active volunteers at any one time, the newspapers would almost certainly have folded or have been reduced to a photocopied newsletter put together by a group of friends in the evening. Even an organization such as TBP, with staff ready to work notoriously long hours for low wages, could never have published a well written and produced newspaper without its volunteer labour. Volunteers also enhanced the sense of camaraderie and family in at least some parts of the group, and these two aspects contributed to the long term vitality and viability of the organization. Over time, in part because of TBP's own success, the market became less distinct and new competition flourished, and these realities, along with an altered community, damaged the organization's ability to survive economically.

10.3.6 Ownership and Control of the Workplace

Many other researchers, in particular those working within a socialist framework, have been preoccupied with the influence that ownership and control have over the character of worker co-operatives. Commentators such as Carter (1987) and Paton (1978) believe that worker control and ownership are vitally important in sustaining co-operativeness. Carter considered two rescue-type co-ops and his

conclusions seem to accurately reflect the experiences of the groups. The groups that I visited, on the other hand, suggest that ownership and control may or may not be important. In my study, only one organization - QD - was owned by its workers in the traditional sense. The three Toronto groups each had boards in which the proprietorship actually rested, and NCDA was granted authority but not ownership by its public service sponsors. For the Toronto groups, the existence of boards of directors seemed to matter very little, since the boards were quite removed from the day-to-day activity of the workplace. These boards were mostly the product of legal arrangements set up to ensure non-profit status. In none of these cases did workers feel obligated to request permission from their boards to operate as a collective.

At NCDA the situation was rather different as the organization was funded by the local authority and also had a periodically active planning committee. The organization was completely dependent on the local authority for operational costs and a budget needed to be approved each year. Annually, the funders required a statistical and descriptive report of activity, and had the power to decide if funding would be extended, this in an environment in which the local authority was starved for funds, continually reprioritizing its programmes, and never clear about what the Agency was supposed to achieve. Clearly, the actual amount of control that the workers had over their workplace was tenuous, even during the frequent periods when the planning committee was inactive. It is unclear, however, from the experience of the workgoup, if any of this actually had much of an impact on their culture. This is evidence that the borough Council's report generated a

certain collaborative spirit, but to link this with ownership would oversimplify the dynamics which were part of that situation.

The idiosyncratic ownership arrangements evident in these five groups, then, might well have had an influence on the development of co-operative working arrangements and meanings, but in relationships that are not necessarily predicted in the literature. These experiences remind us that just as important as formal control through ownership is how workers feel, either in spite of or because of external stakeholders.

10.4 No Best Way

The experience of the groups in this study begin to isolate several general categories of factors that help to explain the emergence and sustenance of a co-operative spirit. What we have seen, though, is that each situation has specific problems and necessarily requires an individualized response. In some cases we have seen that a particular division of labour can in one instance facilitate co-operative behaviour and in another situation work against it. Clearly, there is no best design for co-operative working; rather, there are a variety of possibilities, and the best choice will be contingent upon variables such as the people involved, the nature of the work and the economic vitality of the business, all of these factors operating in distinct ways at each developmental stage of the organization.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSIONS

11.1 Introduction

This thesis has been concerned with both the process and outcome of research. Throughout my thesis I attempted to describe my learning relative to co-operative working, and at the same time highlight and learn from the research process itself. In my inquiry I used ethnography as the principle methodology for collecting data from worker-managed organizations in order to be congruent with my research perspective (that I characterized as naturalism). In this concluding section, my goal is to bring my study to an end by summarizing and assessing the findings and implications of my inquiry, and by reflecting on the strengths and shortcomings of my research. I will begin the chapter by reviewing and highlighting what I believe are the most instructive and educative outcomes of my research. With these points having been made, in the second portion of the chapter I will attempt to stand back from the specific findings of my inquiry, and engage with my research project more reflectively and critically. In particular, I will consider and assess the efficacy of the particular research methods that I used, the adequacy of the data that I emphasized, and the soundness of the meanings and interpretations that I made.

11.2 Thesis Summary

As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, it is over validity and

reliability that debate between naturalists and other more traditional researchers becomes the most heated. For the positivist, an acceptable research project is one that mirrors the principles of scientific inquiry by emphasizing a clear distinction between the investigator and the subject, establishing internal and external validity, and demonstrating that the research might be replicated by others with the same results and findings. Unlike the positivist, the naturalist does not have 'rules' of science to justify his or her findings and calls on an alternative set of guidelines to establish the trustworthiness of a research project. Although a science-based positivist might never fully accept a report based on qualitative data, naturalists have reached some general agreements on the best way to judge each other's work. From a methodological perspective, they look for evidence of such things as prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation (using multiple sources), research cycling (balancing reflection and encounter), interpersonal competence, peer debriefing and member checking (see, for example, Lincoln and Guba 1985; Guba 1981; Heron 1988). At the same time, most naturalists are also concerned with the substantive aspects of a research report and expect the theoretical and analytical conclusions of an inquiry to provide a deep level of understanding and insight about the social situation being considered. In this regard, naturalists look for evidence that a researcher has not only penetrated and explored a particular social unit with methodological rigour, but that he or she has also been able to select and present, in a competent manner, that constellation of data which is the most revealing, enlightening and perceptive.

Insofar as this research project is concerned, I believe that I have been able achieve the kind of trustworthiness that naturalists have come to expect from each other's work. At the same time, I would hasten to add that an outcome of my inquiry has been learning about research. Thus, at the conclusion of my project I am able to pinpoint several shortcomings in my work, and I have some thoughts about how I might approach the study if I were to do it all again by incorporating the things I have learned.

On the positive side, my ethnographic engagements were prolonged and I gathered information from every source that was at hand, including myself. Although my approach to feedback and member checking was informal, I strove for an ongoing process of communication and dialogue with organizational participants. In my design, these discussions provided another layer of data rather than absolute confirmation or disconfirmation of 'truths', as often as not, producing a revised set of questions and suggesting new areas for exploration. Indeed, as I have recorded earlier, these member checking and peer debriefing exchanges were amongst the most powerful and insightful moments in my learning.

I did not originally conceive of my research process within a cycling metaphor, but arrived at an action-reflection model quite naturally as a way of making sense of my own experience and the experience of the organizations I was visiting. As I pointed out in Chapter 7, each cycle of my research raised new and interesting questions and puzzles which then became the basis for further exploration. Vital to this process was the uncovering and exposing of the presuppositions I had brought into the research.

My inquiry into worker-managed organizations was guided in the first instance by curiosity and openness. Nevertheless, once I was engaged with several organizations, I discovered that I had brought a number of presuppositions into the research. Through a process of introspection, dialogue and member checking, I was able to reach an understanding of my preconceptions and found myself more open to the themes emerging from within my field encounters. My initial concern with the surprisingly high degree of conflict that I observed gave way to a revised set of questions, in which I became more and more interested in the multi-dimensional nature of co-operation. I began to understand that co-operation was a more complex phenomenon than I had originally imagined, and that it represented an overall ethos rather than a completely tangible set of behaviours or activities. I learned that it had a variety of meanings, differing between organizations and individuals, and that the meaning of co-operative working could change within the same organization over time. I discovered that the primary sources of meanings about the nature and character of co-operative working initially brought into these organizations - such as political outlook, the nature of enemies, work orientation and methods, attitudes, values and skills - tended to give way to new interpretations and meanings as workers adjusted to the experience and perceptions of individuals and external pressures. Within a framework of organizational and temporal specificity, I also came to understand that there were some similarities in the workgroups regarding the ways that change took place and the impetus behind change. My analysis of these change processes produced a developmental model that was able to capture

the unique growth patterns of each organization, and at the same time reveal and highlight the more general evolutionary trends of the enterprises as a group from the moment of birth through to a mature form.

As my research progressed, I became less and less preoccupied with trying to figure out the precise boundaries or demarcators of co-operative working, and more concerned with the variety of ways in which organizational participants might act, think and behave within the framework of co-operation. I became interested in fully understanding the changing patterns of meanings brought to the organizing endeavour, and with the way meanings were negotiated and renegotiated into a shared reality.

Nonetheless, my research suggested that there were some thresholds beyond which organizational participants no longer perceived themselves as working co-operatively. The experience of the workgroups in this study helps to illustrate not only the ways in which a co-operative spirit emerges, becomes sustained and maintained over time, but also hints at its vulnerability and suggests how it can decline. The information I have gathered suggests that there are some general situational factors that play an important role in whether or not participants interact in ways that produce feelings and perceptions of co-operation. The historical context, the characteristics of individuals, the characteristics of the group, the organization of the work, economic factors and ownership/control patterns, all come into play, but in ways that are unique for each group.

In tandem with my observations and learning from the field sites,

my appreciation of the literature matured. Initially, I was dismissive of much of the published information to do with worker co-operatives, but over time I became more sensitive to its strengths as well as its limitations. Many of the factors cited in the literature as leading to the degeneration or facilitating the success of co-operative management, I began to appreciate, were relevant, insightful and thought-provoking, but presented in an overly deterministic and categorical way, leaving too little room for the situational elements that seemed to be the hallmark of my observations. I found that my observations were more in line with a second voice in the literature, less preoccupied with explaining worker self-management within a success-failure perspective, and with less reference to universal principles. This group of researchers created more room for explanatory diversity by referencing and describing organizational cultures.

Neither of the dominant views of worker co-operatives which are apparent in the literature, however, seemed to gel with my recurring observation that change and development patterns were the cornerstone of an illuminating description and cogent analysis of organizational experience. As a result, I began to read a more general organization theory literature. In this literature, I was able to locate a body of knowledge concerned with organizational change and development which offered a significant contribution to the understanding of the workgroups I had visited and worker co-operatives in general. In particular, I found my insights about developmental patterns closely aligned with theorists using the organizational life-cycle metaphor as their principle analytical tool. The life-cycle perspective, although

not generally applied to worker co-operatives, seemed to me the most appropriate and powerful meta framework in which to describe and capture the experience of the workgroups I had visited.

The fact that I found the general organization theory literature to be more helpful than that specific to worker co-operatives is, I believe, worthy of some note. My observations from the field suggest that worker-managed organizations do have developmental stages that are similar to other organizations, and this conclusion poses a number of interesting questions. For example, one might ask: how different are worker co-operatives from other organizations? My conclusion is that they are different, but not as much as the received wisdom would have us believe. The reasons for start-up may be different, reflecting political, social and self-help goals that are often unique; the product or service is sometimes unusual; the absence of a formal hierarchy (at least in the early stages) may set them apart; there may be a degree of worker ownership that is fairly atypical; but, when all is said and done, they are organizations. As such, they have similarities to more traditional forms, not the least of which are the patterns of general change and development. They also have in common with other types of workgroups, problems and dilemmas to do with such things as motivation, job satisfaction, leadership, conflict, task allocation, markets and other external forces. As a result, practitioners and supporters of worker co-operatives might be well advised to consult the vast compendium of organization and management literature that is available, as a viable and useful source of advice and support. By the same token, many traditional workplaces are now experimenting with more co-

operative and egalitarian styles of management (autonomous work groups, self-managing teams, participatory decision-making, etc.) and might draw important lessons from the experience of the worker co-operative sector. It is not my intention to imply that all organizations are alike - indeed, I would emphasize their differences - but insofar as worker co-operatives are concerned, my research suggests that these differences and distinctions have tended to be characterized in terms that are unnecessarily polemic.

By reflecting on my findings, I think it is possible to isolate a number of important trends and dilemmas of co-operative working. First, there is no 'ideal' model for worker-managed organizations. Co-operative working might better be seen as a dynamic process in which participants work toward a goal of equality and collaboration, but may never fully arrive. In the final analysis, a co-operative spirit might best be envisioned as a moving target - a target that is illusive, changeable and perhaps never to be fully realized. This perspective helps to shift debate away from all encompassing concepts like degeneration, and creates room for individual experience and experimentation. With growth and development, the meaning of co-operative working often changes as the group tries to accommodate the realities of internal and external forces - a balance that often requires letting go of the meanings that characterized the start-up period. In some groups this can be a difficult and even painful process. By the mature form, the meanings attached to co-operative management may well provide room for conflict, disagreement and competition.

Second, there appears to be a developmental trend toward more formal structure and toward more specialization of roles. This developmental pattern is often in response to such things as individual needs and organizational growth, but can bring with it a shadow side requiring careful monitoring. A division of labour into departments may provide for member satisfaction and efficiency, but at the same time it may sow the seeds for subsequent weakening or even loss of the collective organizational voice. In my cases we have seen, for example, that at DEC the division by product tended to act against integration, while at TBP, division by interdependent functions actually seemed to facilitate co-operative behaviours. DEC's experience also suggests that in the mature form, the establishment of a formal co-ordination/administrative position may be a useful and even necessary antidote to the problems created by a division of labour.

11.3 Critical Reflections

Having made the above points, I will now step back and engage with the research project more critically. With the benefit of hindsight, a researcher can assess not only the strengths but the limitations of the project just completed, and I will take this opportunity to explore and assess my research from a couple of interrelated perspectives. First, I will evaluate my methodological choice of ethnography; second, I will consider the sorts of data that I emphasized in my ethnographic accounts; and third, I will assess the interpretations that I took from the data I collected.

One approach to ethnography is to enter the research by specifying

the theoretical puzzle, problem or dilemma. Although I believe that in my case a more open-ended approach was appropriate, with the benefit of this project for guidance, I might now approach worker-managed organizations with a more precise sense of the puzzle or concern that would guide my research. One of the unavoidable difficulties with the broader approach that I took in my research was the sheer range of data that presented itself. At the beginning of the project I was guided by a position that I should collect <u>all</u> information. Once in the field, though, I found this was next to impossible. I could not be everywhere at once; I could not be on site every minute of the day; and I could not possibly have been able to divine when and where important informal conversations and encounters might be taking place. While my research engagements were prolonged, and I believe that I was able to discern and document the activities of organizational participants in the main, I cannot claim to have accessed 'everything'. Consequently, if I were starting all over again, I might select a more focused aspect of worker-managed organizations to pursue in depth, such as decision making. Additionally, I might limit my inquiry to just two groups, spending significantly more time with each organization.

Before I entered the field, it seemed only natural to me that interviewing people would be one of my central ethnographic strategies. I conceived of the interview as a way of building rapport and trust, and learning about each individual's conceptualization of the organization and their place in it. I soon learned, however, that it was important to take the interview strategy a couple of steps further and interview people more than once (usually with increasing degrees of informality),

especially before and after events that seemed particularly disturbing or exciting. This gave me an ever-expanding data base - one I was then able to compare with what individuals said and did in meetings and other activities.

My decision to collect extensive interview data, however, does raise a number of questions to do with its place in an ethnographic report. The central issue has to do with the limits or validity of data gathered during interview situations. I am not alone in confronting this dilemma, however, because almost all naturalists use oral accounts.

> The expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts. The most striking feature of language is its capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself...What people say in interviews can lead us to see things differently in observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 107, 118).

Naturalist inquirers in general, then, confront challenges to their use of the spoken word, at the very least because people say things for a variety of reasons, not all of them known by the researcher. The task of research, then, becomes to hear what people say and then explore what meanings lie behind those words. In retrospect, I am inclined to a view that I would continue to emphasize oral accounts, but with some additional effort at probing and exploring the context in which participants express their views, and with more concern for understanding and interpreting the meanings underlying the words and accounts.

As I indicated in chapter 2, I sought to explore the organizational culture of each of the groups I studied, understanding culture as referring to an ideational system that reflects the deepest, often

unconscious and taken-for-granted, assumptions and values that guide and give direction to social activity. In this sense, I argued, organizational culture must be understood as the product of people's minds, manifest in the form of shared meanings and symbols, emerging from social interaction. Was I successful in obtaining information at this level?

I learned that information at the level of basic assumptions does not necessary reveal itself easily or readily, even with the best intent and most appropriate methodological tools. Like many other researchers with similar concerns, I chose ethnography to gather this kind of information, and I made several choices regarding the particular ethnographic approach I would use. These choices were reflected not only in the researcher-subject relationships I fostered, but also in the type and variety of data I collected and subsequently highlighted in my case studies. I opted to make explicit my position as a researcher, and to be as open as possible about my goals. Even at the Newham Co-operative Development Agency, where my employment contract might have allowed for a covert and secretative research stance, I chose to be completely open about my dual roles as employee and researcher.

One could argue, as a result, that organizational participants dealt with me as a researcher and perhaps 'presented' themselves to me in a way that represented their conceptualization of how they wished to be described in a research report, contrasted with the way in which they might have presented themselves had I been 'just another employee'. However, it is my view that the issue of 'presentation' arises in all ethnography: if one's role and research agenda is not made explicit, a

role of some kind will nevertheless be 'assigned', and this role may influence how respondents organize and offer information (consciously or unconsciously). In all types of ethnography, then, the researcher must be alert to the way respondents display themselves, conscious that respondents may construct information in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. The goal for any ethnographer, regardless of the research relationship, as a result, is to reach an understanding of the way he or she is being 'managed' and alert to the ways in which respondents are presenting themselves. As Goffman (1959:238) counsels:

> I have suggested that any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management. Within the walls of a social establishment we find a team of performers who co-operate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation.... We often find a division into back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented. Access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from coming into a performance that is not addressed to them. Among members of the team we find that familiarity prevails, solidarity is likely to develop, and that secrets that could give the show away are shared and kept.

Without claiming to have penetrated and documented faultlessly the 'shows' taking place in the groups I visited, my research was able to provide a couple of powerful illustrations that I succeeded in getting behind 'masks'. One example comes from The Body Politic. In my discussions with Andrew, the youngest and newest member of the organization, he presented himself as a happy, content employee, indicating in conversation that TBP was a relatively egalitarian organization which afforded him an opportunity to realize many of his personal and professional goals. At the same time, there was much evidence in his body language and demeanour to suggest that what he was saying was not congruent with what he was actually experiencing. Andrew

indicated that he often felt 'sick'; I noticed that he almost always assumed a low profile in meetings and almost never engaged with other workers in debate. Perhaps he felt he had to 'protect' the organization when confronted with a researcher such as myself, or perhaps he imagined I would report any unfavourable comments to his co-workers. Subsequently, Andrew presented his feelings in a memorandum - a report in which he characterized himself as angry and disappointed with how he perceived the organization. In his memo he suggested that the organization espoused 'team work' and 'co-operative relationships', but that his experience lead him to believe that something closer to the opposite was the case. Interestingly, his co-workers paid little attention to Andrew's memo, but at the same time made virtually no effort to refute what he had written.

In other situations, though, I might have been less successful in understanding and documenting what Goffman has characterized as the 'back room' and the 'front room' of organizational activity. In general terms, I think I approached this deep level of understanding most successfully at Newham Co-operative Development Agency. This might well reflect the greater amount of time I spent with the group, and the particular nature of my involvement as an employee. With this group, I was connected in a personal way with the 'reality' construction, and perhaps this personal link helped me to understand it better and more completely. At any rate, an important lesson I take from this project is that coming to an awareness of basic assumptions in an organization is not easy and is the central challenge for naturalists. At the same time, I believe I have acquired skills to aid me in subsequent research

endeavours.

As I said, my research reporting placed considerable emphasis on what group members actually said about themselves and the groups they work in. That approach was inescapable to some degree, in that group history emerged as important data, and the only way I could gain access to that was through the personal recollections of organizational participants, and documentation. In fact, as I argued in my thesis, the particular way in which people framed the history of their groups was important in unravelling the basic assumptions underlying the behaviour I observed in the present.

On the other hand, I am aware that there are real risks in relying on the words that people themselves use. As in the case of Andrew, I tried to be sensitive to other data collaborating or qualifying the words used by group members. Where I thought that the words used reflected a deeper reality, I used them liberally. There is no final guarantee, however, that the spoken word does reflect deeper meanings and assumptions. The most that can be expected of a researcher in my situation is to be sensitive to the complexity of the task at hand. I realize that in my extensive reliance on group members' own assessments of themselves and their groups, I am open to criticism, some of it justified, for being insufficiently sensitive to 'impression management'.

In retrospect, I might have narrowed my inquiry, and probed in more detail and with a wider range of observations the possibility of hidden meanings and assumptions that differed from those being presented orally. I might, for example, have focussed more on group members'

descriptions and interpretations of co-operation, reflecting these against behavioural patterns on the one hand, and deeper assumptions on the other. As my thesis progressed, I came to see this as an interesting dimension to explore (and my report has things to say about that), but not as completely as it would if I were starting out now.

My experience with this research project also suggests to me that further exploration of co-operatives would benefit from longitudinal analysis. If organizational change is inevitable and necessary, as the experience of these workgroups suggests, then research projects should attempt to capture and describe this change process more fully. Longitudinal studies, especially those that chart a five-to-ten-year period, would be a most appropriate addition to the literature. One might argue, as a result, that this is what I should have done. This argument, though, misses a crucial point. All research ends with some better sense of what comes next, often with advice for others. My research, then, provides a data base on which to argue the appropriateness of long term engagements and longitudinal study - subsequent investigations could start where I leave off.

In addition, I believe that the developmental 'model' I have presented has important implications for consultants and educators who work with members of worker co-operatives. My findings suggest that consulting projects should take into account the developmental stage of the group, recognizing that each phase would require somewhat different interventions and consultations.

11.4 Full Circle?

In many ways, my research has come full circle from its starting point. I began my research with a personal attraction to the idea of worker-managed organizations as a location of co-operative working relationships. This attraction was based on my observation that many of the large bureaucratic work settings I was familiar with were characterized by conflict and competition, and a belief that smaller, non-hierarchical workplaces would be different. What I have learned is that co-operative working is not about a set of factors or structural arrangements, but rather a mood or spirit of working together - a cultural phenomenon. So called 'worker co-operatives' may or may not be able to achieve and sustain this spirit. By the same token, it seems to me, I may have misjudged other types of organizations. If co-operation is a cultural factor, then a wide variety of organizations might be able to create and maintain a co-operative spirit. In other words, a well developed co-operative spirit could reasonably be found and nurtured in a variety of settings.

I conclude this final learning cycle feeling I have found answers to the questions that initiated my research. I believe I have acquired and shared an understanding of the nature of worker-managed organizations. I also conclude this project with an idea about what might come next. My interest is still with co-operation at work (where is it? what does it look like? are there general lessons?), but my interest at this stage has expanded to encompass a broader range of organizations.

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